

Who Is This Jesus?

Matthew 21:1-11: *When he entered Jerusalem, the whole city was in turmoil, asking, "Who is this?" The crowds were saying, "This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee!"*

Matthew 26:14-24: *Then one of the twelve, who was called Judas Iscariot, went to the chief priests and said, "What will you give me if I betray him to you?" They paid him thirty pieces of silver. And from that moment he began to look for an opportunity to betray him.*

On the first day of Unleavened Bread the disciples came to Jesus, saying, "Where do you want us to make the preparations for you to eat the Passover?" He said, "Go into the city to a certain man, and say to him, "The Teacher says, 'My time is near; I will keep the Passover at your house with my disciples.'" So the disciples did as Jesus had directed them, and they prepared the Passover meal.

When it was evening, he took his place with the twelve; and while they were eating, he said, "Truly I tell you, one of you will betray me." And they became greatly distressed and began to say to him one after another, "Surely not I, Lord?" He answered, "The one who has dipped his hand into the bowl with me will betray me. The Son of Man goes as it is written of him, but woe to that one by whom the Son of Man is betrayed. It would have been better for him that one not to have been born."

Judas, who betrayed him, said, "Surely not I, Rabbi?" He replied, "You have said so."

As we enter into Holy Week, let's ask the question, Who is Jesus? Who is Jesus to you? Our texts for today give us some insight into how some Jesus followers in his day answered this question. Let's look at these texts.

The first is the familiar story of what we call Palm Sunday. It takes place at the time of the Passover, the biggest festival of the year for the Jewish people. It was a time when they remembered that God had delivered them from Pharaoh when they were slaves in Egypt. Jews from all over the world came to Jerusalem to celebrate this time of deliverance and freedom. A story we will read later this week on Good Friday is of Simon, the Cyrene, who carried the cross for Jesus. Simon was from northern Africa and probably traveled weeks to months by foot to get to Jerusalem for this huge and important festival.

This festival, this feast day, was a huge deal for the Jews — their highest holy day. What must this have been like for the Romans who were in power at the time, to have the Jews celebrating a time of deliverance? As the ones who controlled the money and the politics and had a vested interest in keeping the Jews under their thumbs, it might have made them a bit squeamish thinking of all these Jews in one place talking about deliverance. For the Romans it was important that the Jews remember their place and who was really in charge and not get any ideas of revolt or freedom in their heads.

So, to start off the Passover, the Roman leader of the area would have a parade showing the Roman's military might. The area governor, Pontius Pilate, would come in on a war horse surrounded by the military and the extra "peacekeeping" forces that would be coming into Jerusalem for the Passover. This display of might, and the characteristic that Marcus Borg and John Crosson call "Imperial Theology" in the book *The Last Week*, were meant to show the Jewish people who was really in control.

Borg, Crosson and other historians and Bible scholars write about how this big Roman military parade at Passover was meant to remind the Jews to "stay in their lowly place."

Jesus & Followers Did Something Radical

So, what does Jesus do? Probably on the same day and, who knows, maybe even at the same time, Jesus leads his own parade. And the people call JESUS king. This is quite radical really. More like a protest than a parade. There are no poster boards with sayings on them, but rather palms and cloaks.

Right after President Trump was elected, there were some protests where people carried signs that said, “Not MY President.” This parade of Jesus is kind of like that. In this parade, Jesus and the people following him were essentially saying that the leaders of Rome were not their king. They were saying that Jesus was their king. Now, while this motley group of Jesus followers didn’t have power or weapons or even a plan to take on the Romans, this kind of statement in a society where there was no “freedom of speech” was brave and really quite dangerous.

And the people shouted “Hosanna” when Jesus came into town. Hosanna, hosanna, hosanna to our king! The word Hosanna is interpreted as a sign of praise here. And, indeed, it is. But is also a plea for help. It can mean, “Save Us!” Hosanna, Jesus. You are our King. Save us!

People, not unlike many of us in our beloved Benton Harbor, just wanted to be free and have a chance to make their way in a world that the Romans dominated.

So, imagine two parades — a big military parade on one end of town where the Romans were making sure all the people gathering for the Passover knew who was really in charge! — and a smaller, motley crew of poorer people hailing Jesus. Asking Jesus to save them. Hoping that the kingship of Jesus would mean more prosperity and hope for them in a world dominated by Roman might.

No wonder some of the bystanders said, ‘Who in the world is he?’ Who is this guy who has the courage or the craziness to let people claim him as king amid the Roman-occupied world?

Who *is* he?

Some of the people shouting —those who knew him, and maybe those who hoped Jesus would take on the Roman powers and help create a new world for the poor Jewish people — said, “He is the prophet, the one from Nazareth of Galilee. “

Now Nazareth was a small town. It may have been similar to saying that this “king” is a prophet from the small towns of Galien or Covert in our own area.

Not the Kind of Prophet Many Wanted

The people who answered the question, “Who is he?” at this political protest kind of parade on Palm Sunday saw Jesus as a prophet. Prophets take on the status quo and speak the truth to power. They were hoping he would do this. And Jesus did speak the truth to power, but not in the way many were hoping he would. Jesus wielded the power of love, which got him killed, and by the time we get to Good Friday it looks as if the Romans and the crooked priests in the Temple who cozy up to the Romans are going to win. So, while Jesus is a prophet, he wasn’t the prophet many wanted him to be.

And after reading the text from this Palm Sunday parade, which we sometimes call the triumphal entry, we read a text from later in the week. The shift from crowds shouting “Hosanna!” and cheering for Jesus changes in just a few days.

A few days later we find Jesus celebrating the Passover in the Upper Room with the Twelve—the men he lived with the past three years, his closest brothers, and those he was trying to teach about who he was and why he was here. In the Upper Room he told them that the end was near, though they didn’t seem to really quite get it. And in the text we can find some other answers to the question, “Who is He?”

Jesus tells the disciples that one of them will betray him. That must have been deeply unsettling for these men who had given up everything to follow Jesus. One would betray him? In a way similar to men on a military mission, they had stood by each other like family the past three years. They loved Jesus. Would one of them betray him? Each says, "Is it I, Lord?" They call him Lord. That is who Jesus was to them. That is partially how they would answer the question, "Who is He?" To most of these disciples He is their Lord.

Now there were various uses of *kyrios*, the Greek word translated "Lord" back then. Sometimes the Lord was the head of a household. It is interesting to note that the Greek word *kyrio* is used to describe the Almighty God in the early Greek translation of the Old Testament, called the Septuagint. So, calling Jesus Lord here surely may have been a way for these disciples to connect him not only as the head of their group, but as a leader connected closely with God. He carried and shared the very voice and message of God to them. And they followed. He was their Lord. There is a relationship of intimate honoring and following. To these disciples Jesus was their Lord.

Now, look at how Judas responds to Jesus. He also says, "Is it I?" But he calls Jesus "Rabbi," not Lord. He calls him a "teacher." So, for Judas, Jesus was a teacher. And this is a different kind of understanding and relationship than the other disciples had. Judas doesn't call Jesus Lord, but calls him teacher.

We don't know for sure, really, why Judas betrayed Jesus. But it does appear that Judas didn't have the intimacy with Jesus the others had. Judas was struck by Jesus' teaching, maybe. Judas called Jesus Rabbi, which is a title of respect, but it is not necessarily a title of closeness. Earlier in the text we learn a little more about Judas as he meets with the chief priests. "What's in this for me?" he asks. Judas, it seems, was out for himself and maybe was following Jesus for very selfish purposes. But before we get too judgmental of him, we must all confess that often our own faith and our following of Jesus have much more to do with what is in it for us than about

our concern for the kingdom of God.

Rev. Jill Duffield, editor of *Presbyterian Outlook* magazine, in talking about this text reminds us that when we can put a distance or a wall between ourselves and other people — as Judas did here in calling Jesus teacher but not Lord, surely not Lord of his life — we can dehumanize people and even betray those we are in relationship with. She reminds us how African slave traders could separate themselves from the humanity of the people they captured, or how good Lutherans in Germany could follow the Nazi regime and participate in exterminating Jews. Those of us who were able to visit our sister congregation in Ghana a number of years ago were stunned to visit the Elmina slave castle on the coast near Accra. On top of the place where slaves were kept to be shipped to America was a church. People would worship over the space where men and women were kept in brutal captivity. It is amazing how we human beings can put barriers in our hearts and minds between us and other people. This kind of separation enables us to do things that are inhumane. This is maybe what happened to Judas here.

Who is this Jesus for YOU?

So, we have at least three answers to the question, “Who is He?” Who is Jesus in these texts? For some Jesus is a prophet who will bring in a new kingdom and beat the bad guys. For Judas he was a good teacher, a rabbi. And for the disciples he is “Lord,” the lord of their lives and one they were intimate with.

How we answer this question, “Who is He?”, surely will influence how we relate to Jesus and how we live our lives as people who follow Jesus. As in all relationships, we probably answer that question differently at different times.

Holy Week is a good time to ponder that question in prayer again in our lives. Who is He? Who is this Jesus? Who is this Jesus for YOU?

Is he Lord, teacher, prophet — or all of these? Is he a friend, a guiding shepherd, a good man, a mystery?

I Invite all of us to take some time to read these passion narratives in Matthew or John this week and pray and reflect about who this Jesus is to each of us. Also, there are many movies about Jesus's life and these last days. The United Methodist Church sent out a list of these movies this week, and I can send this link to you if you wish. There are inaccuracies, of course, and a variety of interpretations and perspectives shared in these movies. You don't have to agree with what the actors or directors portray, or with the interpretations or theology the movies are trying to communicate. Instead, just dwell with the stories, the images, the message. Please don't let this Holy Week pass without taking some time to truly ponder these events and pray and think about Jesus and who he is to us. Who is Jesus to you, my friends?

In Baptism, We Say We Need Jesus's Love

In a few minutes we will celebrate the sacrament of baptism, and four people will be answering the "Who is Jesus?" question publicly, at least in part. In preparing for this sacrament, grandmother Kathy Loveless and mother Chrissy Loveless will stand up as adults for Jake and Amelia, who are being baptized. And Jake and Amelia themselves will answer the question, "Who is your Lord and Savior?" They will answer, "Jesus Christ." And all of us who have been baptized have either answered that question for ourselves or had an adult answer that question as they held us in their arms proclaiming that the love of God was at work in us even as little children.

My friends, it is a radical and powerful thing to say that Jesus is our Lord and Savior. When we say Jesus is our Savior, we are saying that we need the love of Jesus, this power outside of ourselves or a power that is given deep within ourselves from God to save us, to heal us from our brokenness and sin. We are confessing that we are powerless over so much of the pain in our lives and we need Jesus to not only help us but to save us. When we say that Jesus is our

Lord, we are saying that we mean to follow the ways of Jesus the best we can in this life. It means we want to live in the ways of love, the ways of peace. It means that we will seek to make all the decisions in our lives based on how we think Jesus is leading us. As the song goes, “We surrender all to him our blessed Savior.” Jesus is our Lord.

And how can a human being say these things? We are surely human and surely will stumble and fall in our efforts to live out these beliefs. But we can say them — not because we are so good or have our acts together or are even deserving of this love and grace God has for us — but because God loves us and has been reaching out to claim us and has been calling us since we were in our mothers’ wombs. The Good News of the Gospel is that before we could even speak Jesus’s name, or even our mothers’ names, Jesus knew us and claimed us and loved us. That’s called Amazing Grace.

So, as you witness and participate in this baptism this morning, ask yourself, Can I call Jesus my Lord and Savior? And what does that mean? Who is this Jesus to you? Who is this Jesus to us?

I’ve been tempted to give you more guidance in answering this question, my friends. But I think we should leave that guidance up to your hearts and to the Holy Spirit. Also, I’m hoping and trusting that our children and youth will have some pictures they can share with us. And that their artwork may also give us guidance as we ponder anew, “Who is Jesus?” Who is Jesus to you? Who is Jesus to us?

So, my brothers and sisters, go into Holy Week with a “Hosanna!” on your lips and with this question deep in your heart. In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, Amen.

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