

“WHO IS THIS?”
Isaiah 50:4-9a, Psalm 118, Matthew 21:1-11
The Rev. Ryan Lambert
Palm Sunday, March 20, 2005
Copyright © 2005

What was the atmosphere like that day in Jerusalem? What was happening? Who was this Jesus person who everyone was turning out to see? I can't fully imagine what was happening in Jerusalem that day, but I wonder if it wasn't something like this. . .

Shortly after Jimmy Carter was elected president, he visited Spokane, Washington. I was in the first grade and desperately wanted to join with the nearly half of my school who was skipping class that Friday and joining with the crowds in downtown Spokane to get a glimpse of the new president. Although I was very young, I remember after watching him walk in his inauguration parade with his young daughter, who was not much older than I, that I really liked this president. It wasn't a deep political conviction, but in first grade how much can you really expect? I remember seeing the news coverage of President Carter's address that day, and later I remember seeing a friend's pictures that really showed nothing more than the tops of a few heads as a dark car passed. I could only imagine the noise and the clamor of that day. Is that what it was like in Jerusalem?

Or maybe it was like this: For Jason's 13th birthday, he invited a group of us over to his house to spend the night. I remember we were told we would need clothes for being out in the sun and that we would be home the next evening. We were told to bring sun screen and water bottles; and so, as Jason and his parents talked of such things, we all (or maybe just my parents and I) assumed we were off to a pool or a lake. Instead, after breakfast the next morning, we headed toward Joe Albi Stadium in Spokane where 25,000 people were gathering to hear "The Billy Graham Crusade" as he brought his ministry to Spokane. Aside from feeling set-up by Jason's parents, and in an atmosphere I wasn't very comfortable in, I remember the celebratory feel of that day and the adulation that seemed to come from the crowd. It was 1983, and for weeks after that event I remember the "born-again" talk that seemingly echoed all around Spokane. But sitting there that day, I remember feeling as though I couldn't tell if people were reacting to the message of salvation that the Rev. Graham was preaching, or whether they were celebrating the celebrity that stood before them. Joy and praise filled that sunny afternoon in a football stadium. Is that what it was like in Jerusalem?

Or this maybe? Fast forward a bit more than a decade and this time the setting is Seattle. It is early October and manager Lou Pinella, catcher Dan Wilson, and a host of other Seattle Mariner players and executives are gathered on a platform overlooking the plaza at the Westlake Center Mall. As I clock off for lunch from my job at the Seattle Monorail, I jump into the crowd of roughly 10,000 people who are revved up for the first-ever playoff game in Seattle Mariners' history. As the players and coaches speak, there is a sense of celebration, pride, and hope that seems to sweep over the crowd. There is also a weird sense of importance that seems to be emanating from the crowd. Even as a huge baseball fan, I stood in the crowd that day aware of the strangeness of a "pep rally" for a team of players and executives who were separated from us by millions of dollars and incredible differences in lifestyle. But those were

heady days in Seattle as huge headlines and huge rallies brought news of the latest Mariners' victory, and Seattle fell in love with baseball. How far was it from the Westlake Mall to the streets of Jerusalem?

Three events; three carnivals of celebration and celebrity. One event was religious, one political, and one worship of another kind. . .at the "church of baseball." No matter how disparate these events were, I cannot help but think of them as similar to the events in Jerusalem on the day when Jesus entered, and many from the city turned out to welcome him. Years of rock concerts, sporting events, civic demonstrations, and political rallies leave me with a pretty good idea of the atmosphere on that day in Jerusalem. I've been there, I think.

So we might know what it felt like on that day in Jerusalem. But that day wasn't exactly a political rally.

It wasn't exactly a religious gathering. It certainly wasn't a rally for a certain team. In all of the large events in which I have participated, I have known exactly why I was there. To hear great music, to support a candidate, to rally for peace, to root on a team. Whatever the reason, I could name it and it brought me out. But in Matthew's narrative of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem, there is that one little question that nags at me. You will find it right there in the 10th verse of the passage: "When he entered Jerusalem, the whole city was in turmoil, asking, "Who is this?" And the crowds were saying, "This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee."

"Who is this?" That question nags at me because I wonder why people were there if they weren't sure about whom they were watching and cheering. I wonder how people even came to know about the event. I wonder what they had heard that got them to come out and welcome Jesus in such an audacious manner. Had they been there when Jesus was going through Galilee teaching in the synagogues? Had they been in the crowd that followed Jesus after the Sermon on the Mount when he healed the leper?

Maybe some of them had been at the table with him when he ate among tax collectors and sinners. Maybe it was then they saw the exclusivity of God fall away. Maybe they had seen him spar with the Pharisees. Maybe they felt included and no longer confined by their sins or the structures of their faith. Had some of those who lined the streets that day heard him teaching? Had they come to understand new things about their God merely by listening to him? Were there women among the crowd who had been welcomed by Jesus when no other man had even spoken to them? Were there women who came to see the one who might lead them? Had word spread so quickly? Had some of those people who lined the streets that day been among the famous crowd who was fed by him? Had they eaten from that endless supply of bread and fish? Had they been touched in such a tangible way? Were there poor on the side of the street just hoping he would have something for them? Were they pulled in and compelled to watch because there was something happening, and it was better to have a ticket and be inside the arena than hear about it after? Perhaps there were even Roman soldiers there, watching, and just waiting to get their hands on that "Jesus guy," thinking "He'll pay for his words." What part of the life and ministry of Jesus brought them to the side of the road that day? We will never know. We know where the story goes in the coming days; but before we move on to the rest of the events of Holy Week we, too, should answer that question. It is our question, also: Who is this?

Who do you say that Jesus is? Do you come to welcome Jesus because he is the healer of body and soul? What are the wounds you carry that need to be healed? What does faith in Jesus offer to you that cannot be found in other places? What do you need from this one who healed the sick and dying but no

longer walks upon this earth? Wounded and broken are we, and into every event of our lives we carry these wounds; but we desperately want to let go of the physical pain. We want to let go of the pains of pride and prejudice. We want to let go of the losses that mount and often seem to overwhelm us. We need to be healed—all of us—from that which afflicts us and gives us pain. Is that why you come? Does Jesus the healer call you out to the roadside to celebrate his coming as you seek spiritual and physical healing?

Do you come to meet Jesus because he is the compassionate one who included children, women, tax collectors, and fishermen among those who were closest to him? Do you say, “Even me?” Do you come because you, too, are welcomed? Do you come to find God in the face of one who liberated people from the realities of their life who, rather than seeing them for whom they were, called upon them and us to become the people God wishes us to be? Do you come to him because he calls you beyond the categories and labels of our culture to instead be labeled only as a beloved child of God? Is this who he is? Does Jesus the liberator call you out to the roadside to celebrate his coming?

Do you come to welcome Jesus because your sins and failures overwhelm you? Does the darkness of doubt and fear gather like a cloud as you sit alone in your office, your living room, or lie staring at the alarm clock as another late night hour goes by? Is that why you come? Is it because of the promises that Jesus proclaimed about new life, faith in God, and salvation from our own selfishness and brutalities? Does the salvific nature of Jesus’ ministry call you to the curb to welcome him, filled with thanksgiving for the knowledge that our own misdeeds cannot keep us from being fully known and welcomed by God? Is that why you come?

Do you come to welcome Jesus because of the others who do? Do you come because you, too, need the power of the other 11—or 111 or more—who also follow in the footsteps of Jesus? Do you come for community, knowing that what you bring is made more valuable and special when it is offered with the gifts of others? Do you need the voice of many to stand with you as you echo the words of justice that Jesus taught? Do you come for the strength of numbers? Is that why you stand by the roadside?

As we celebrate this Palm Sunday, and as we prepare for the darkness and light of our Holy Week celebrations, I think we all are confronted by the personal nature of the “Who is this?” question. Quite frankly, I think it is a question that we in the United Church of Christ shy away from. It’s the danger of trying so hard to be inclusive: we end up working very hard to be all things to all people. But in that process, we endanger our own identity. And so I ask you, who do you understand Jesus to be? Who is it that you proclaim as we wave palm branches? Who is it that you will soon mourn as the darkness of Good Friday closes in? Why are you here? Why do you follow him? Can we answer the question? Are we brave enough to use personal language when we talk about Jesus? Am I brave enough?

Or are we just another face in the crowd? Are we just being pulled along? Jesus was many things to many people: a healer, a teacher, a prophet, a liberator, a savior—and these things and more. On this Palm Sunday, I ask you to set aside who he was for the many people and instead ask you to consider who he is for you.

Thanks be to God. Amen.