

**First Presbyterian Church
Southampton, New York
“Who is this Guy?”**

Matthew 21: 1 – 11

Palm Sunday

March 20, 2016

The scene was one of anticipation and excitement and sheer pandemonium! Men, women, and children of all ages, shapes and sizes had gathered and were now jostling, and straining, and trying their best to get a look! Everybody who was anybody was there, and trying to be part of the great event! Everywhere, people were yelling and cheering and raising a royal ruckus! Clearly, something *very* big was going down... something stupendous was happening! The one whom they'd longed to see was drawing near... the one who'd turned the world on end was about to make an appearance.

They'd been told so many great stories... they had heard of so many wonderful exploits. And now, *finally*, the day had come when they could see with their own eyes, and hear with their own ears, and touch with their own fingers! The authorities huddled together in anxious concern, not sure how to handle the boisterous, exulting crowd. They were uncomfortable with so much hoopla... so much attention... so much noise. They wondered if it had all been blown out of proportion.

But this was one celebration that no one would be able to stop. If the crowd hadn't raised the chorus of cheers, the very stones by the wayside probably would have. The people had been waiting far too long... their need to be near their hero was far too great. So, roll out the red carpet! Fill the air with electricity! Plan a reception fit... for... a... king! This would be a party for the ages, and it would change peoples' lives forever!

Oh, wait a minute... did you think that I was referring to the account of Jesus' Triumphal Entry into Jerusalem? The Palm Sunday story that we read together from Matthew's gospel? Oh! Sorry about that! No, actually I was talking about the Academy Awards presentation that was on TV last month! I was describing the scene that took place as all the movie stars, supermodels, rock singers, and other celebrities made their way out of their limousines, and up the red carpet to the Dolby Theater, where the awards ceremony was being held. I was commenting on the fact that, as each star passed through the gauntlet of fans, press, and paparazzi that lined the entrance to the theater... a new avalanche of praise and adulation would erupt from the adoring crowd!

People cheered! People carried pictures of their favorite celebs! People snapped photos like mad, trying for that perfect shot of Leonardo DiCaprio, or Matt Damon, or the popular Jennifer Lawrence! Big shots from around the world were there... and they all wanted to be part of “the scene!” So, I can see how you might have been a little confused by my opening remarks! Oscar night and the Triumphal Entry both had all the trappings of a very big deal. Both had the same look, the same “feel,” the same kind of “hip hip hooray!” kind of sound!

And the only question I want to ask this morning is... *how could that be?* How is it that an exercise of such obvious superficiality and self-indulgence, like the Academy Awards, could be so reminiscent of the scene which we read about in Matthew? Do Sylvester Stallone and Jesus really have so much in common, that the same brand of hysteria is going to break out... whichever of them happen to come to town?

It does seem to be a pretty curious situation... but the answer is really not that hard to understand. Because, frankly, if the people in the crowd in Matthew's gospel had had their way, they would have turned Jesus into the very same kind of razzling-dazzling, image-is-everything, "hey, look at me!" kind of celebrity that preened and strutted into that theater on Oscar night.

The people in our text from Matthew roared, and cheered, and waved their palm branches because they *thought* that they were getting a super-star, super-hero, super-man who would bounce the Romans, give Israel a great name, and make them all look and feel *good* about themselves once more. Jesus was supposed to be a celebrity... a rock star... the heroic King of the Jews! And so, they treated Him like royalty!

And, you know what? That reaction really was appropriate! Because, Jesus really *was* the King! And, unlike the parade of bejeweled, expensively coiffed, image-conscious stars that passed by our TV screens on February 28... there wasn't one thing that was superficial about Jesus' kingship. There was no phoniness... there was nothing being done "just for show..." there was no Messianic mugging for the camera.

There was simply Jesus, humbly being who His Father wanted Him to be... simply doing what His Father wanted Him to do... unpretentiously accomplishing the purpose that His Father wanted Him to fulfill. But that, as we know, became a real problem. Because, in doing all of that, you see... in being all of that... Jesus was manifestly *not* being what the people wanted. He wasn't acting like the popular definition of royalty... He wasn't carrying a big stick with which to pound in the nearest Centurion... He wasn't talking big about national pride, and earthly power, and political prestige and patriotism.

Instead, He was being the kind of person that Paul described in his letter to the Philippians... someone who: *"Though being in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped... but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant... being born in the likeness of ordinary, average, humanity. Humbling himself... and being obedient to God, to the point of his own death... even a humiliating death on a Roman cross."*

Friends, whatever else we want to say about Palm Sunday and the Triumphal Entry, you can be sure that the crowds weren't out there cheering and waving palm branches because Jesus was going to act like *that!* No, being royalty was supposed to mean being powerful, and famous, and a "mover and shaker," like Prince Charles and his boys... or the Emperor Tiberius, who was sitting on his throne in Rome as Jesus came riding into town.

It *wasn't* supposed to mean being humble, and gentle, and deferential, and sacrificing your life for the sake of adulterers and prostitutes and tax-collectors and all those other "undesirables." And when Jesus showed that His brand of royalty would do

just that, well, the cheering and the palm-waving and the shouts of “Hosanna!” quickly disappeared... and the people who once supported Him either deserted Him, betrayed Him, or lobbied for His execution. People were asking, “Who is this guy?” And the answer came back, “Not anybody that we want to have anything to do with.” And Palm Sunday began to morph into Good Friday...

You know, the message of this Palm Sunday is really the same as all the other Palm Sundays which have transpired over the past two millennia. And the message is that Jesus has come to be a different kind of leader... a different kind of king... a different kind of royalty, than the kind we’re all so used to. And, in so doing, He offers us a different kind of life and a different perspective on reality than we normally expect, or think that we desire.

Jesus comes riding in on His donkey, and by His example, He asks us: *“What really is important in our world? What really counts? What are the things that truly matter to us? Where are we going to turn to satisfy the hunger for hope, and for peace, and for meaning that gnaws at our hearts... and keeps us awake at night?”*

Our culture strongly suggests at least one answer to such questions, and we saw that answer lived out at the Oscar Show last month. What “matters,” in this view, is fame... fortune... power... celebrity. To have the adulation of the masses, to have the money to wear outrageously expensive jewelry, to have the body to wear skimpy clothes, to have hundreds of strangers fighting for a spot to take your picture: that, so we’re told, is what it is to be successful, and happy, and fulfilled. That, so the story goes, is what it means to “live like royalty,” and to know the true meaning of life!

But there are serious problems with this answer, a fact which is demonstrated every time a movie star checks into drug rehab... or a socialite goes through emotional meltdown in the tabloids or on the internet blogs... or an all-world, gazillionaire athlete skips out on his family, in search of something more exciting. In all these cases, and in so many others, too... people are proving the point that all the fame, money, and power in the world cannot give us what our hearts need most of all: peace... hope... meaning... love.

We all have an inner hunger and need for God, which simply can’t be filled by fame, fortune, or celebrity. And some of the people who know this best are the famous, and the wealthy, and the celebrated. There is, in all of us, a need for something more... and it’s just that “something more” that Jesus has come to give us. With His ministry, death, and resurrection, Jesus has taught us what it really means to live like royalty. He has shown us where to look for hope... and for peace... and for joy.

He doesn’t offer us entertainment, or wealth, or prestige, or fame... but what He does offer is an understanding of our lives and a relationship with God which will give us the inner serenity that we crave, but which so often seems to be just beyond our reach. And, at the end of the day, that’s more than enough reason to welcome Jesus to Jerusalem... and to our hearts... with all the hosannas and palm branches that we can get our hands on!

As we proclaim the good news of Easter this year, let’s not get distracted by all in our world that’s glitzy and loud and trendy. There will always be many heroes to woe us

and call us to follow their example... and some of them may even be able to teach us a good lesson or two. But let's remember that Jesus came to give us something more, and something different... something that this world just can't give. He came to give us grace, and peace, and hope... and the priceless gift of eternal life! His may not have been an Oscar-worthy performance... but it sure is worthy of our allegiance, and our faith, and our trust!

As we make our way together through Holy Week, and through Easter, may our hearts be open to what Jesus has come to give us. If its hope and grace we seek, then may we dare to give Jesus a chance in our hearts. And may we accept His invitation to place our trust, and to seek our good, in Him! In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit, amen!