

Who Is This?
Matthew 21:1-11
with Luke 5:17-26; 7:36-50; 9:1-9, Mark 4:35-41
Sunday, April 13, 2014
Palm Sunday
St. Charles Avenue Baptist Church
Elizabeth Mangham Lott

The Gospel reading in five parts:

One: Luke 5

17 One day, while Jesus was teaching, Pharisees and teachers of the law were sitting near by (they had come from every village of Galilee and Judea and from Jerusalem); and the power of the Lord was with him to heal. 18 Just then some men came, carrying a paralyzed man on a bed. They were trying to bring him in and lay him before Jesus;[g] 19 but finding no way to bring him in because of the crowd, they went up on the roof and let him down with his bed through the tiles into the middle of the crowd[h] in front of Jesus. 20 When he saw their faith, he said, "Friend, your sins are forgiven you." 21 Then the scribes and the Pharisees began to question, "**Who is this** who is speaking? Who can forgive sins but God alone?" 22 When Jesus perceived their questionings, he answered them, "Why do you raise such questions in your hearts? 23 Which is easier, to say, 'Your sins are forgiven you,' or to say, 'Stand up and walk'? 24 But so that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins" —he said to the one who was paralyzed— "I say to you, stand up and take your bed and go to your home." 25 Immediately he stood up before them, took what he had been lying on, and went to his home, glorifying God. 26 Amazement seized all of them, and they glorified God and were filled with awe, saying, "We have seen strange things today."

Two: Luke 7

36 One of the Pharisees asked Jesus to eat with him, and he went into the Pharisee's house and took his place at the table. 37 And a woman in the city, who was a sinner, having learned that he was eating in the Pharisee's house, brought an alabaster jar of ointment. 38 She stood behind him at his feet, weeping, and began to bathe his feet with her tears and to dry them with her hair. Then she continued kissing his feet and anointing them with the ointment. 39 Now when the Pharisee who had invited him saw it, he said to himself, "If this man were a prophet, he would have known who and what kind of woman this is who is touching him — that she is a sinner." 40 Jesus spoke up and said to him, "Simon, I have something to say to you." "Teacher," he replied, "speak." 41 "A certain creditor had two debtors; one owed five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. 42 When they could not pay, he canceled the debts for both of them. Now which of

them will love him more?" 43 Simon answered, "I suppose the one for whom he canceled the greater debt." And Jesus[l] said to him, "You have judged rightly." 44 Then turning toward the woman, he said to Simon, "Do you see this woman? I entered your house; you gave me no water for my feet, but she has bathed my feet with her tears and dried them with her hair. 45 You gave me no kiss, but from the time I came in she has not stopped kissing my feet. 46 You did not anoint my head with oil, but she has anointed my feet with ointment. 47 Therefore, I tell you, her sins, which were many, have been forgiven; hence she has shown great love. But the one to whom little is forgiven, loves little." 48 Then he said to her, "Your sins are forgiven." 49 But those who were at the table with him began to say among themselves, "**Who is this** who even forgives sins?" 50 And he said to the woman, "Your faith has saved you; go in peace."

Three: Luke 9

Then Jesus called the twelve together and gave them power and authority over all demons and to cure diseases, 2 and he sent them out to proclaim the kingdom of God and to heal. 3 He said to them, "Take nothing for your journey, no staff, nor bag, nor bread, nor money—not even an extra tunic. 4 Whatever house you enter, stay there, and leave from there. 5 Wherever they do not welcome you, as you are leaving that town shake the dust off your feet as a testimony against them." 6 They departed and went through the villages, bringing the good news and curing diseases everywhere.

7 Now Herod the ruler heard about all that had taken place, and he was perplexed, because it was said by some that John had been raised from the dead, 8 by some that Elijah had appeared, and by others that one of the ancient prophets had arisen. 9 Herod said, "John I beheaded; but **who is this** about whom I hear such things?" And he tried to see him.

Four: Mark 4

35-38 Late that day he said to them, "Let's go across to the other side." They took him in the boat as he was. Other boats came along. A huge storm came up. Waves poured into the boat, threatening to sink it. And Jesus was in the stern, head on a pillow, sleeping! They roused him, saying, "Teacher, is it nothing to you that we're going down?"

39-40 Awake now, he told the wind to pipe down and said to the sea, "Quiet! Settle down!" The wind ran out of breath; the sea became smooth as glass. Jesus reprimanded the disciples: "Why are you such cowards? Don't you have any faith at all?"

41 They were in absolute awe, staggered. "**Who is this?**" they asked. "Wind and sea at his beck and call!"

Five: Matthew 21:1-11

When they had come near Jerusalem and had reached Bethphage, at the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two disciples, ²saying to them, “Go into the village ahead of you, and immediately you will find a donkey tied, and a colt with her; untie them and bring them to me. ³If anyone says anything to you, just say this, ‘The Lord needs them.’ And he will send them immediately.” ⁴This took place to fulfill what had been spoken through the prophet, saying, ⁵“Tell the daughter of Zion, Look, your king is coming to you, humble, and mounted on a donkey, and on a colt, the foal of a donkey.” ⁶The disciples went and did as Jesus had directed them; ⁷they brought the donkey and the colt, and put their cloaks on them, and he sat on them. ⁸A very large crowd spread their cloaks on the road, and others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. ⁹The crowds that went ahead of him and that followed were shouting, “Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest heaven!” “And when Jesus entered Jerusalem, the whole city was stirred up, asking, ‘**Who is this?**’ The crowds were saying, “This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee.”

“Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest heaven!”

As Lent began, we put away alleluias. The doxology changed, the Gloria patri disappeared. We embraced introspection and self-reflection with fewer unexamined words of praise. In our commitment to the well examined life, we have spent much of the past five weeks asking the question, “Who am I?” Our Lenten exercises are largely focused on self—the self that we truly are, the self that we hope to be, the self that God created in God’s own image.

We began by gathering rocks and committing to a season of wild wilderness. Each week we have added layers of reminders and symbols: baptismal waters and creating waters and blessing waters; the flame of God’s Spirit that guides us, illumines the path we are called to take; the dry bones of our faith, the cracked and dried out remnants of our feeble efforts to live independently from God and from one another, and now the palms of our wavering “hosannas.”

Five weeks ago we embraced a spiritual practice of intentionality together. Erin Dunigan says of this season, “Lent offers us an opportunity to slow down, to meander rather than to rush, to allow life to sink in a bit, to find ways to go deeper and not always stay on the surface. A time to observe, to pay attention, and then to act — and in so doing provide the space to move from rush to replenish. When we take this practice

seriously, we plant its blessings so that they benefit not only us in our lives for this season, but also extend to the world around us.”

And so our questions and conversations have all circled around our corporate and individual identities: Who am I created to be? Where are God’s fingerprints on my life? How do I fail to live up to God’s dreams for me? How do we fall short as a community? How can we do better?

Today marks the transition from our Lenten journey into Holy Week. We have examined ourselves and considered the ways God is challenging us to stretch and grow into our truth. While that work always continues, the question changes today. Now we look to Jesus with that same honesty, with the same open eyes and ask, “Who is this man?”

We hold the stories of his life side-by-side and consider this teacher, healer, sin forgiver, friend of religious leaders and friend of outcasts, this patient prophet who taught the same story over and over from every angle in hopes that the crowds might get it, the debt canceller, the storm silencer, the one who captured Rome’s attention just as he did the attention of children and women and men and tax collectors and Pharisees and fishermen. He’s captured our attention, too, though we don’t always know what to do with him—this Jesus of the Gospels.

By now, we just want our alleluias back. Like the crowd around Jesus’ drama, we begin with glad “hosannas” today, and we would easily settle for that as the end of our story. But we must journey through the whole week. We must confess that even when we hear the stories of Jesus, we lose focus, we stop paying attention, we don’t fully believe that his way intersects with the way of our lives.

We stand somewhere in that crowd today, between the praise and the questions, and we must each decide how to make sense of this man. Who is this?

Reflecting on Holy Week, Marie Alford-Harkey writes, “We may be an Easter people, but we cannot get to the resurrection without first sitting with death.” When we come face to face with our own sin, when we are honest about our own brokenness and despair, we know that death is in us just as much as life is. How will we welcome and engage Jesus this week? Who is he not just in the stories of our faith but in the stories of our lives still being written? Who is this man that we gather around each week and profess with our lips? Who is this man for our church, for our future?

Jesus' entrance into Jerusalem was likely "an inconspicuous event" designed to make a point before the small crowd gathered there.¹ He was a servant, not a warrior; a leader of words and way, not sword and empire. Whether people knew him well from gathering around the table and hearing his voice up close or knew him from a distance from his public sermons and demonstrative faith lessons, no one really seemed to know what to do with him. Whether in anger or curiosity or love or need or belief or affection, they all kept following him and asking, "Who is this?"

These stories are retold each year because they are ours. We are each character and each voice, we are the praisers and the doubters all at once. "During Holy Week," writes Sara Miles, "we wave palms in the air and hail Jesus as king, the long-awaited messiah who's going to save us from our oppressors, then we change our minds and scream that the oppressors should crucify him; we share a loving last supper with Jesus and he washes our feet, then we sneak out after dinner and betray him. Jesus begs us to stay with him, we promise we will, then we don't. We abandon him, he's arrested and beaten; he forgives us, then we run away. Then Jesus is killed; we lay him in the tomb and weep; we go back for him, then he's gone, then he's back, and then — wait! — he's not dead at all."²

Who is this?

"This is Jesus, the One we confess died not in order to make it possible for God to love us but rather to demonstrate that God already does love us and that God's love is our only hope. This is Jesus, the one we proclaim each week as messiah and lord, source of hope and healing. This is Jesus, the paradigm of God's action in the world, whose story comes to a climax this week in order that our story might begin anew and afresh with the hope and promise of a good ending.

Who is this? It's not just the question of the day, it's the question of the week we call Holy and, truth be told, of the ages. Who is this? Week after week we answer that question in trust and confidence, raising our voice above the din of the culture to speak his name and point to God's redemption. But perhaps, on this day, perhaps it is enough -- and perhaps even better -- that we don't [have to hold the answer to] the question, but only ask it. Perhaps," as David Lose suggests, "we might ask this most significant question and then allow ourselves to ponder, to wonder, and we pray to answer, with

¹ Douglas Hare, *Interpretation: Matthew*, pp. 237-240

² Sara Miles, <http://www.journeywithjesus.net/Essays/20140407JJ.shtml>

the flawed and fickle crowds then and now, that this is Jesus, the prophet of Nazareth, who is also Christ the Lord.”³

There are multiple opportunities before you this week to sit with others as we ask this question about Jesus. Each day this week, the chapel doors will be open to the public for silent prayer and reflection from 10-3. If you are nearby, please take time to welcome that silence for a few moments.

On Thursday night we will gather at 5:30 for a simple meal followed by a pray walk leading us into a time of worship at 6:30 for Maundy Thursday. We remember Jesus’ time with his disciples during the Passover meal as he anticipated his arrest.

On Friday night at 8 p.m. our friends and neighbors, Redeemer Presbyterian Church, will lead a Good Friday Tenebrae service in this space. This is a service of lights in reverse as flames are extinguished to mark Jesus’ death.

Before our alleluias return, before we celebrate and welcome resurrection, journey through this week in all its fullness holding the question, “Who is this?”

³ David Lose, <http://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?post=3162>