



LAKWOOD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
Rev. Terence A. Lucarelli
PALM SUNDAY ... April 17, 2011

GUESS WHO?
Matthew 21:1-11

"Guess who?" I know you've played the game. You slip up behind someone, cover their eyes and say, "Guess who?" And they always know! I do that with the preschool kids every once in a while. It's such a kick. They know who it is ... because they've usually seen me walk by them or something. And as soon as I do one, others immediately say, "Do me! Do me!" They know who I am! They just watched me play the game and heard my name. But they still want to play the game anyway! As I cover their eyes, they begin to giggle, because they know the answer before I even ask the question. "Guess who?" And they scream, "It's Pastor Terry!"

In today's Scripture passage about the Triumphal Entry, Jesus seems to be playing a game of "Guess who?" This story for Palm Sunday is ALL about the identity question. Verse 10 makes it clear, "When he entered Jerusalem, the whole city was in turmoil, asking, 'Who is this?'"



"Who is this?" No hands over the eyes, but still, "Guess who?"

I believe the question helps us understand the fickle reactions of the people present at that first Palm Sunday. And so, let's be real here, the most obvious question from Palm Sunday is, "How could the same people who yelled, 'Hosanna!' on Sunday turn around and yell 'Crucify Him!' on Friday?" The cheers turned into jeers in an alarmingly short time.

How do we solve this mystery? I think we solve it by looking at how the people responded to that question, "Who is this?" Everybody was looking for something different in Jesus, and most were disappointed in who he really was.



Who was Jesus for the CROWDS?

They wanted a Miracle Jesus. They loved the fact that he taught in parables that were easier to understand than the obscure reasoning they heard from the Pharisees. And they loved it when he put the Pharisees in their place. He was accepting of them ALL and taught them the true meaning of compassion. But of all the qualities of Jesus that the crowds loved, they loved him best as a miracle man ... always waiting for the chance to see him heal the lame, the blind or the sick. They must have been really disappointed on the SEVEN occasions in the Gospel of Mark when Jesus performed a miracle, then told them not to tell anyone about it. The crowds wanted a Miracle Jesus ... but he disappointed them.



Who was Jesus for the PHARISEES?

They wanted a Ritual Jesus. They thought the most important matter of religion was to be found, NOT in how they believed or prayed, but in HOW they dressed and washed and ate. Their greatest fear was that their whole culture would be absorbed into the society around them. So they emphasized the thousand little details that kept them distinctly Jewish and thus, kept themselves pure and unique. But Jesus came preaching that the real way to God was through having faith in God and putting people ahead of ritual. He tended to break all the rules that the Pharisees had set up. He broke the Sabbath, ate with the unclean, and defied the laws of purification. The Pharisees wanted a Ritual Jesus ... but he disappointed them.



Who was Jesus for the ZEALOTS?

They wanted a Military Jesus. The Zealots were the radical nationalists who were ready to use force, even terrorism, to overthrow the Roman government. These followers expected Jesus to take up a sword and call his followers to arms at any moment. They clearly wanted Jesus to be the leader of their resistance movement. When Jesus cleansed the Temple, they must have whispered to one another, "It's time to gather the troops." Luke, in his observation of the cleansing of the temple said, "They supposed that the kingdom of God was to appear immediately" (Luke 19:11). But Jesus said to "render unto Caesar that which is Caesar's." And He said, "All who take the sword will perish by the sword" (Matthew 26:52). The Zealots wanted a Military Jesus ... but He disappointed them.



Who was Jesus for the DISCIPLES?

They wanted a Victorious Jesus. They had seen it all ... the crowds, the miracles, the blasting of the Pharisees. It must have been a heady time to be one of the chosen twelve. I'm sure "What's in it for me?" was foremost in their minds. "Which of us will be seated at Jesus' right hand when he comes into his kingdom?" was the question of debate in the ranks. They were thinking of the prizes, not the costs. Yes, these were the true believers, and Simon Peter spoke for them all when he boldly proclaimed at Caesarea Philippi, "Thou art the Christ!" They expected Jesus to be accepted quickly by every Jewish person ... to be greater than David. But Jesus kept talking about dying and how they would be persecuted for following him. No Victorious Messiah, rather the Suffering Servant. And he made it clear that following HIM meant taking up a cross. The Disciples wanted a Victorious Messiah ... but Jesus disappointed them.

All of these different groups were in the crowd that first Palm Sunday, EACH with their own private view of Jesus. As they waved the palm branches and shouted, "Hosanna," they assumed they were finally getting what they wanted.

- ◆ The CROWDS ... more miracles!
- ◆ The PHARISEES just knew they would catch Jesus in a misstep so they could turn the crowds against him.
- ◆ The ZEALOTS were thrilled that Jesus was finally bringing on the revolution!
- ◆ For the DISCIPLES this was going to be their greatest week of notoriety and glory!

ALL of their private assumptions were quickly dashed as the week progressed.



When we look closely at the dynamics of that first Palm Sunday, we're not really surprised at what happens on Friday. On the surface, it seems like the Triumphal Entry was a grand celebration, but underneath we find the seeds of the crucifixion lying among the palms.

Fred Craddock says the Triumphal Entry was a PARADE, a PROTEST, and a FUNERAL PROCESSION. Sure, we've all imagined it as a PARADE ... with the crowds shouting "Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes..." as Jesus slowly rides into Jerusalem. I guess we could even understand it as a PROTEST. But folks, most importantly, it was also a FUNERAL PROCESSION. Only Jesus knew that this was the beginning of the end ... the cheering would soon evaporate.



I believe that the most IMPORTANT question any of us can ask in our life is the one the people asked in our passage, "Who is this?"

What kind of a "Jesus" do YOU want?



Phillip Yancey begins his book, *The Jesus I Never Knew*, by saying, "I first got acquainted with Jesus when I was a child, singing 'Jesus Loves Me' in Sunday school, addressing bedtime prayers to 'Dear Lord Jesus,' watching Bible club teachers move cutout figures across a flannel graph board. I

associated Jesus with Kool-Aid and sugar cookies and gold stars for good attendance. This Jesus," he said, "was a lot like Mr. Rogers."

Guess who? Mr. Rogers?

When Yancey began to watch films about Jesus, he found that the actors often portrayed Him in stereotypical, serene fashion. Yancey says, "In older Hollywood films about Jesus, he recites his lines evenly and without emotion. He strides through life as the one calm character among a cast of flustered extras. Nothing rattles him. He dispenses wisdom in flat, measured tones. He is, in short, the Prozac Jesus." (The Jesus I Never Knew, p. 88)

Who is this? Mr. Rogers? Guess who? Prozac Jesus?



In the 1960s movie Cool Hand Luke, while in prison, Paul Newman learns that his mother has died, and he sings the song "Plastic Jesus," while he plays the banjo:

"I don't care if it rains or freezes,
Long as I got my plastic Jesus
Sittin' on the dashboard of my car.
Comes in colors, pink and pleasant,
Glow in the dark 'cause it's iridescent
Take it with you...when you travel far."

Who is this? Mr. Rogers? Prozac Jesus? Plastic Jesus?



I remember a poem I read a long time ago written by a young man. It was about how he had his Jesus in a BOTTLE so that he could take him out when it was convenient and then put him back on the shelf when it wasn't.

WHO IS THIS? Do we worship the "Plastic Jesus" or the "Prozac Jesus"? Do we want our "Jesus in a bottle" so we can control him? GUESS WHO? Why it's a Mr. Rogers kind of Jesus, one that won't be a threat to us? The problem with ALL these versions of Jesus is that he is so much more ...and he has always challenged people's misperceptions.

So ... if you're looking for any of those, you're going to be disappointed. And the reason WHY? You're looking for the wrong kind of Jesus.



Tuesday night, at our final "Living the Questions" class, we got into a discussion about people's perceptions of God. I can't remember who said it, but someone mentioned that they have a friend who shared with them that when someone tells them they're an atheist, their response is: "Tell me about the God you don't believe in." And when they do, they usually respond with, "I don't think I'd like that kind of God either."

Our disappointments in God usually come from a wrong view of God. And the same thing can be said of Jesus.

On that first Palm Sunday, ALL of those people were looking for the wrong kind of Jesus ... and they were DISAPPOINTED.

But when YOU really SEE Jesus ... the REAL item ... YOU'LL be amazed and certainly NOT disappointed at what you find.



She sat across from me and I could see the pain on her face. She talked of her divorce, her downward spiral into addiction, her daughter whom she hadn't seen in nearly three years. Sure, she had pulled her life together ... back from the dead so to speak ... but could her daughter forgive her for the desertion, the horrible way she had lived her life, the lack of love? Could God forgive her?

Could she forgive herself? Brought up Catholic, she could only recall the judgment, the condemnation. She was divorced; she had used drugs; she had thrown away her family ... all things damned by her church and therefore damned by God.

I listened and then I simply said to her, "I learned a song when I was a little boy in church. I bet you know it too." And then I sang, "Jesus loves me, this I know." She started to sing hesitantly with me, "For the Bible tells me so." Tears began welling up in her eyes. "Little ones to him belong. They are weak but he is strong." And now with more strength and conviction, "Yes, Jesus loves me." I stopped singing, she continued, "Yes, Jesus loves me. Yes, Jesus loves me. The Bible tells me so."

Two weeks later I received a call from her. She had been to see her now 17 year old daughter. "At first," she said, "I couldn't find the words. And then I just started singing, 'Jesus loves me, this I know...'" And you know what? My daughter started singing it with me! And when we were finished ... we hugged and kissed. I have my daughter back and she has her mother again. Terry, Jesus loves ME."



As theologian, Marcus Borg says, "Jesus is, for us as Christians, the decisive revelation of what a life full of God looks like. Radically centered in God and filled with the Spirit, he is the decisive disclosure and epiphany of what can be seen of God embodied in a human life. As the Word and Wisdom and Spirit of God become flesh, his life incarnates the character of God, indeed, the love of God. In Jesus we see and know God's love."

GUESS WHO? Who is Jesus for YOU?

The real meaning of Holy Week ... indeed the real meaning of his whole life and death and resurrection, was that Jesus came to show US how to live and love; so much was this his mission that love took him to a cross, there to show us how to die; and then because of love, God showed us just how we will live again ... FOREVER!

"For God so LOVED the world..." that God gave us JESUS.



You know, it really doesn't matter what the CROWDS were looking for. It doesn't really matter what the PHARISEES or the ZEALOTS or the DISCIPLES were looking for. The real meaning of Palm Sunday is between YOU and GOD.

What kind of Jesus are YOU looking for?

We still ask the question, "Who is this?"

And your answer ... YOUR ANSWER makes ALL the difference.

Amen and Amen.