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Tell Me the Story of Jesus Matthew 21:1-11; 16:13-27

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When we read the Bible it is helpful to look at the questions being asked because often they are the questions the writer wants us to answer.

For example, in Matthew 8:27 the disciples ask,

“What sort of man is this, that even the winds and the sea obey him?”

In Matthew 16:13 Jesus asks the disciples,

“Who do people say the Son of Man is?”

In Matthew 21:10 the question is asked about Jesus, *“Who is this?”*

Throughout his Gospel Matthew is telling the story of Jesus and encouraging us to answer the question: **what kind of man can say and do what Jesus says and does?** Listen to Matthew 16:13-27 -

“Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, **“Who do people say that the Son of Man is?”** And they said,

“Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.” He said to them, *“But who do you say that I am?”*

Simon Peter answered, **“You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.”** And Jesus answered him, *“Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven. And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.”*

Then he sternly ordered the disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Messiah. From that time on, Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering at the hands of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, *“God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you.”* But he turned and said to Peter, *“Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.”*

Then Jesus told his disciples, **“If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it. For what will it profit them if they gain the whole world but forfeit their life? Or what will they**

*give in return for their life? For the Son of Man is to come with his angels in the glory of his Father, **and then he will repay everyone for what has been done.***”

How much do you know about Jesus? Most of us know at least a little bit. Some of us started learning about Jesus when we were very young children – we can recall some facts and perhaps some parables or stories. As we grew up the number of folks who give Jesus serious consideration, or thought, or study tends to diminish. In Matthew 12:5, Jesus asks his critics, ***‘Have you not read what David did when he and his companions were hungry?’*** The truth is for many of us, we haven’t read much about Jesus in the Bible for ourselves. People hit their teenage years or their twenties and Jesus just kind of drops off their personal radar screen. Perhaps we had trouble believing some of the things the Bible says about Jesus; maybe we just didn’t think Jesus mattered much to our lives.

I believe that Jesus makes all the difference in the world. What we do with Jesus is arguably the most important decision with the most significant and far reaching consequences that we make in our entire life. No single individual has had a greater impact on the history of the world than Jesus. 2000 years ago he began a spiritual movement that has influenced and shaped the lives of billions of people. Our image of Jesus, how we think about him, greatly shapes how we think about and understand living a Christian life.

Jesus was a first-century Palestinian Jew. He was born probably around the year 6 or 5 BC. His parents fled with him as refugees from Judah to Egypt to escape the murderous scheme of King Herod the Great. When he was still a toddler his family returned to Nazareth. Judea was a Roman province so Jesus grew up a member of a conquered people coping with a difficult life under an occupying foreign power. When he was a boy of 11 or 12, and according to Luke, Jesus visited the Temple in Jerusalem. Not much is known about the years he spent growing into young adulthood. Pontius Pilate was appointed as the Roman Governor in the year 26 and within a year Jesus was baptized by John the Baptist and began his public ministry.

During his ministry he preached about the Kingdom of God, healed people who were sick, taught how people were to live as children of God, and he was finally put to death on a cross like a common criminal.

Jesus is many things to many people. Some people think of Jesus in terms of his being the divine savior – the only Son of God whose death on the cross enables the forgiveness of all who believe in him. Others relate to Jesus as a teacher whose

parables, stories, and vivid images describe a life of purpose and meaning. Others see Jesus as a prophet of social justice who condemned the spiritual emptiness, moral corruption, and grasping for control of those in power while giving hope to the poor, the needy, and the those who were looked down upon by society.

The Jesus we meet in the Gospel of Matthew emphasizes the importance of *doing* God's will rather than merely *claiming* to do so. The Gospel of Matthew uses "*fruit(s)*" as a metaphor for good works 17 times, more than any other writer in the New Testament. Matthew's Gospel is set apart from the other three gospels by its fusion of what we say and what we do. For Matthew, it is not enough to merely *say* Jesus is Lord and Savior. The theme that reverberates through Matthew is heard in 7:21, "*Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but **only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven.***" This same thought closes the gospel when Jesus says the church is to go and make disciples of all nations (Matthew 28:19-20), "*teaching them **to obey** everything that I commanded you.*" Jesus calls everyone who will accept his invitation into a personal relationship with God that leads us on a journey of transformation that shapes our entire life.

In Matthew chapter one, the gospel writer traces Jesus' family tree back through the kings of Israel. In chapter two we read, "In the time of Herod the king wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, asking, '*Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews?*'" We're told King Herod and all Jerusalem were frightened by this news. Herod was frightened because he knew the Jewish people were hoping a political and military leader, like King David, would come to deliver them from the Romans. The whole city and nation might erupt into violence if the patriots and zealots had a true son of David to rally behind. Herod ordered the murders of children to prevent Jesus from growing up and leading such a revolt. Herod's dreadful plan failed to stop God's redemptive plan and now the child Herod sought to eliminate has come to Jerusalem as a mature man. On Palm Sunday, Jesus rides into Jerusalem - a city torn by divisions and power struggles frequently erupting in violence and bloodshed – acting out a parable about what God is offering to those who will not only believe in him but who will do God's will.

Jesus doesn't ride into Jerusalem on a warhorse at the head of troops armed for battle. He comes humbly on a donkey or colt. His followers are grasping tree branches, not spears; they shout "*Hosanna!*" not, "*Attack!*" This is a strange sort of gathering. The crowds were saying, "*This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee.*" People

wondered - Is he a prophet? A trouble maker? An imposter? A rebel? A teacher? Is he going to help us overthrow our oppressors?

Many of those who first followed Jesus probably did so in the hope that he would be the one to rally the people to overthrow the Romans. One of the disciples was openly known as Simon the zealot, referring to his political views not his passion for following Jesus. James and John were nicknamed Sons of Thunder, a title just as fitting for revolutionaries as fishermen. John 6:15 says, *“When Jesus realized that they were about to come and take him by force to make him king, he withdrew again to the mountain by himself.”* In Acts 1:6, even after the crucifixion and resurrection the risen Christ is with the disciples and they ask him, *“Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?”* They are still thinking about Jesus’ purpose first and foremost from a political point of view.

Jesus’ leadership is transforming in many ways, but as Leighton Ford says, *“Jesus saw the heart of the human problem as the problem of the human heart. A radical change from the inside out was at the core of his strategy.”*¹ Jesus’ strategy was not a political one in which transformed earthly governments subsequently changed individual lives. Overthrowing the Romans and putting the Jewish people back in charge of their nation would provide some freedom, but it would not bring the change Jesus is after.

Jesus’ approach is a radical change in the hearts and lives of people altered by following him under the power of the Spirit of God. Jesus’ message is aimed at the transformation of the heart. **Truly living out the gospel Jesus preached impacts every aspect of our lives including our relationships, our economics, and our politics.** Anything less falls short of the faith of Jesus.

The Son of David enters David’s city, but the only throne this king finds is a cross. The only crown he receives is made of thorns. The city that should have welcomed him with fullest worship and obedience – refuses to accept him or is too busy to care about this humble leader or prophet or whoever he is.

It is easy for us to think by celebrating Palm Sunday, coming to worship, maybe taking a palm home, that we are acknowledging Jesus as king in a way that many in Jerusalem failed to do so. Yet it is not those who call Jesus Lord on Sunday who shall enter the kingdom of heaven but those who do God’s will throughout the week. It is not enough to shout, *“Hosanna, Hallelujah”* on Sunday. We are to live out our faith in Jesus

¹ Leighton Ford, *Transforming Leadership*, (InterVarsity Press: Downer’s Grove, 1991), p. 62

on Monday. We are to live as if his entering into our lives and riding into our hearts makes a difference.

Who is this gentle man riding humbly and peacefully into the political and religious powder keg that is still Jerusalem? At the beginning of the week that changed the history of the world, Matthew is asking us to make a decision about who Jesus is. A few are praising him; fewer truly understand who he is and what this journey represents.

Others will cry, "Crucify him!" when he disappoints their political and religious aspirations. Others will be very afraid of everything that unfolds and wonder if they can find the courage to speak. Many people have some vague idea about the events of Holy Week, but we all must make up our own minds about what those events mean for us. Is Jesus the Son of God who died on the cross that we might be reconciled with God; the prophet who reveals God's priorities, and the teacher who shows us the path of life? Is he the Messiah, the leader who would change our hearts, our lives, our destiny, our eternity?

The photographer for a national magazine was assigned to shoot a great forest fire out west. He was told that a small plane would be waiting to take him over the fire. He arrived at the airstrip just an hour before sundown. Sure enough the Cessna was waiting. He jumped in with his equipment and shouted, "*Let's go!*" The pilot swung the plane into the wind and soon they were in the air.

"Fly over the north side of the fire," said the photographer, *"and make several low-level passes."* *"Why?"* asked the nervous pilot.

"Because I'm going to take pictures. I'm a photographer and photographers take pictures." After a long pause, the pilot replied, *"You mean, you're not the instructor?"*²

In life, it is helpful to have an instructor and to recognize who our instructor is and there is none better than Jesus.

As we begin Holy Week, I hope we will take a few moments in these days to ponder what Jesus endured in remaining faithful and true to God for our sake. By presenting Jesus as the long awaited fulfillment of scripture and the true son of David, Matthew hopes that by next Sunday we will answer the question, "*Who is this?*" by saying what the centurion who witnessed the crucifixion said,

"Truly this man was God's Son!"

² Steve Farrar, *Point Man*.

No matter what heartache or challenges we are facing today, I pray the Holy Spirit will give us the courage, faith, and strength to live as if we believe Jesus is God's Son and may we follow him faithfully wherever he leads us.

Matthew 21:1-11

“When they had come near Jerusalem and had reached Bethphage, at the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two disciples, saying 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. If anyone says anything to you, just say this, ‘The Lord needs.’ And he will send them immediately.”

This took place to fulfill what had been spoken through the prophet, saying,

“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.”

The disciples went and did as Jesus had directed them;

They brought the donkey and the colt, and put their cloaks on them, and he sat on them.

A very large crowd spread their cloaks on the road, and others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. The 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!”*

When he entered Jerusalem, the whole city was shaken, *“Who is this?”*

The crowds were saying, *“This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee.”*