

First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham
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Staying on Message

Luke 19:28-40: *After he had said this, he went on ahead, going up to Jerusalem. When he had come near Bethphage and Bethany, at the place called the Mount of Olives, he sent two of the disciples, saying, 'Go into the village ahead of you, and as you enter it you will find tied there a colt that has never been ridden. Untie it and bring it here. If anyone asks you, "Why are you untying it?" just say this: "The Lord needs it." 'So those who were sent departed and found it as he had told them. As they were untying the colt, its owners asked them, 'Why are you untying the colt?' They said, 'The Lord needs it.' Then they brought it to Jesus; and after throwing their cloaks on the colt, they set Jesus on it. As he rode along, people kept spreading their cloaks on the road. As he was now approaching the path down from the Mount of Olives, the whole multitude of the disciples began to praise God joyfully with a loud voice for all the deeds of power that they had seen, saying,*

*'Blessed is the king
who comes in the name of the Lord!
Peace in heaven,
and glory in the highest heaven!'*

Some of the Pharisees in the crowd said to him, 'Teacher, order your disciples to stop.' He answered, 'I tell you, if these were silent, the stones would shout out.'

Isaiah 51:1-3: *Listen to me, you that pursue righteousness,
you that seek the Lord.*

*Look to the rock from which you were hewn,
and to the quarry from which you were dug.*

*Look to Abraham your father
and to Sarah who bore you;
for he was but one when I called him,
but I blessed him and made him many.*

*For the Lord will comfort Zion;
he will comfort all her waste places,
and will make her wilderness like Eden,
her desert like the garden of the Lord;
joy and gladness will be found in her,
thanksgiving and the voice of song.*

So how did he do it? How did a junior senator, without a national following, with little name recognition, from a Midwestern state...who was African American manage to defeat a host

of big names and win the presidency? It is after all a very remarkable story. Growing up with single mom, living overseas, attending a liberal church and being a young black man would seem to disqualify one for any sort of high office. Yet Barack Hussein Obama managed to do it. And one of the reasons people give for his victory was that he was able to not only create a campaign theme which touched the hearts of many...but he stayed on message with that theme throughout his campaign. And so here is the quiz...what was his theme? Yes you got it. It was Hope!. Even his campaign signs had the word hope larger than his own name. And when attempts were made to take him off message...mostly with his pastors remarks...Obama made only a slight detour and then returned the theme of hope...a theme to which Americans gravitated in the difficult times in which we are living. Sticking to the theme was central to his success...very much as it was with Jesus who also offered a theme laden with hope.

Now, I am not comparing Jesus and Barack, but if we go back and reread the Gospel of Luke from which we have been taking our stories what we see is Jesus completely focused on one message and one message alone...the kingdom of God. From the opening words of his ministry to his entry into Jerusalem the one theme that has been constantly running through his teach, preaching and healing is hope in the Kingdom of God. What I want to make clear is that this message of hope in the Kingdom of God was not some pie in the sky, heavenly future. The Kingdom of God was the one reality upon which the people of God were waiting. It was an earthly reality in which the world would be turned upside down. The poor would be cared for, the blind would see, the lame would walk and the oppressed would be set free. The Kingdom of God was a world in which people lived out their lives as if the love and grace of God were a reality in the here and now. And for a people politically oppressed, forced into economic hardship and in fear of losing their faith...they needed that word of hope.

Our story this morning is perhaps the crowning illustration of this message of the hope of the Kingdom of God. Everything that Jesus and his disciples do on this entry was intended to not only show but to shout the message. Jesus begins by obtaining and riding in on a colt upon which no one else had ridden...which fulfilled a kingly messianic prophecy. Next the disciples were laying their cloaks down as one would lay them before a king. Finally the hymn they sang was one that was used for victory celebration of a king...and even calls him a king. Then there is one more piece to this that usually goes unmentioned. In their book *The Last Week*, John Dominic Crossan and Marcus Borg present the theory that Jesus' entry into Jerusalem was occurring at the same time as the entrance of Pontius Pilot. Pilot, the local Roman overlord was not normally in Jerusalem but would come into the city just before Passover in order to insure that people were aware that Big Brother was watching. What this means is that Jesus was intentionally claiming to be God's representative of the kingdom in the same way Pilot was for Caesar. The Kingdom of God and the hope the kingdom would bring was the message from which Jesus would not deviate...which ought to cause us to ask...what happened?

I ask that question because the message of hope based on the Kingdom of God is a message few of us have ever heard...unless it was the Kingdom of God as merely a description of heaven...which as we have seen it is not. How then did the church lose the message that was so central to the life and work of Jesus the messiah? The answer can I think be boiled down to

two facts about the Kingdom of God. The first is that the Kingdom is dangerous. In our morning's story you will note that not everyone was happy with the proclamation that Jesus was king. As the disciples rallied some of the Pharisees asked Jesus to cool it. They did so because his kingship and the Kingdom he proclaimed was in direct competition with the Roman Empire in which they lived. In the same way the Kingdom of God continues to be dangerous by offering an alternative vision of the way the world ought to be. The Kingdom of God is one in which caring about others and not consumerism is the core value. It is a world in which what we have is not hoarded but shared with those who do not have. It is a world who values every human and not merely those who are like us. That kind of challenge to the status quo was never appreciated by the church which ultimately saw its role as protector of those in power and not the voice of those in need.

The second reason that the Kingdom of God is not a message we have heard is that it focuses on God's plans and not on our plans. Jesus comes to Jerusalem to die. All of the pomp and ceremony of the triumphal entry is merely a prelude to what will shortly take place. My friends as we discover as this story continues Jesus has no desire to go to the cross. He will pray to God that this death not be God's final decision...yet in the end, Jesus understands that to usher in the Kingdom in a way that will change lives and change the world he has to die. He has to follow God's plan and not necessarily his own. This is the way the kingdom works. It is not, as Joel Osteen declares week after week, the opportunity for us to invent our best selves regardless of the cost to others. It is instead the call to be obedient to God's calling upon our lives. It is a call to risk everything in order to serve the living God. It has been much easier for the church to proclaim that Jesus message was all about us; about us getting to heaven; about us getting what we want; about us being happy and having all of our needs met. The Kingdom is about recreating this world through the work of God's people empowered by the Spirit.

So where does this leave us? I think it leaves us with a choice to make. In face a choice very much like that made by Neo in the movie The Matrix. In the movie Neo, the hero, is given a choice. He has before him one of two pills, red and blue. If he takes the blue pill he is allowed to wake up in his own bed and believe whatever he wants to believe...he returns to life as usual. If he chooses the red pill he will see the truth...the way the world really is and he will have a chance to make it better. That is the choice we make when we choose the message of our faith. Will we choose the blue pill and wake up in our beds with a safe, faith believing whatever we want to believe. Or will we take the red one...the Kingdom one, and be empowered for the dangerous journey of changing the world. It is not an easy decision. It is not one to be made lightly. But it is one that we each need to make. So this week, as we head to the Last Supper, the cross and the empty tomb, I challenge you to ask yourselves, "Which pill will I take? Which choice will I make?"