

The First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham
Palm Sunday: What King is this?
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Psalm 118:1-2, 19-29
Luke 19:28-40

Some of us will recall that the German physician, Albert Schweitzer, turned his back on the comforts of Europe to become a medical missionary and provide needed care for thousands in east Africa. You may not know that Schweitzer was also an accomplished musician and theologian. He was an organist known for the restoration and study of historic pipe organs and also for interpreting Bach. As a theologian, he wrote a famous history of modern investigations into the life of Jesus. His book, entitled *The Quest for the Historical Jesus*, concluded that the quest had been a failure. According to Schweitzer, our attempts to find the real Jesus almost inevitably fail because, when we look at Jesus, we see what we want to see. We see ourselves, or at least someone who reflects back at us the things that we value and aspire to be.

Schweitzer's book was about scholarly studies of Jesus, but his troubling conclusion also applies to more popular portraits of the man from Nazareth. Consider a recurrent American tendency to see Jesus as a master of commerce and industry. During the 1920s, an executive named Bruce Barton wrote a book called *The Man Nobody Knows: A Discovery of the Real Jesus*. He claimed that Jesus was "the founder of modern business," a kind of prototype for Henry Ford. Jesus, said Barton, "picked up twelve men from the bottom ranks of business and forged them into an organization that conquered the world." Laurie Beth Jones' book, *Jesus CEO: Using Ancient Wisdom for Visionary Leadership*, presents an entrepreneurial portrait for the 1990s. Like Barton, Jones says that Jesus was particularly adept at developing the talents of his "staff." Jesus, says Jones, "trained twelve human beings who went on to so influence the world that time itself is now recorded as being before (B.C.) or after (A.D.) his existence." But Jones adds a more contemporary note: Jesus' "Omega management style incorporates and transcends the best of Alpha (masculine) and Beta (feminine) leadership styles," and this "leadership style was intended to be put to use by any of us."

O.K., so when it comes to Jesus, people very often see what they want to see, and in America (although not, I think, in Ecuador) this means that, with some regularity, Jesus has been portrayed as a successful businessman, CEO, or Chairman of the Board. But, of course, this cannot be what most people have wanted to see in Jesus. For one thing, the modern corporation is a comparatively recent invention. Most people at most places and times simply would have had no idea what a CEO is. Success of the kind that people emulate and respect was therefore pictured in other ways. And, very often, successful leaders as well as their coveted qualities of power, prestige, and nobility were

understood in royal terms. The great successes were emperors, princes, and kings. And, this is where our Gospel lesson comes in.

Luke recounts a royal scene, a king's entrance into Jerusalem and, of course, Jerusalem is not just anyplace. Jerusalem is the capital city, the city where Pilate the Roman prefect now governs, and the city where kings David and Solomon once reigned. Jerusalem is the holy city, the home to the sacred Temple, the national shrine. What's more, as he enters into Jerusalem, Jesus receives a hero's welcome. Crowds line the street and shout with a loud voice, "Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven, and glory in the highest heaven." That is, they quote a verse from Psalm 118, and they combine it with words that the multitude of angels sang out at Jesus' birth in Luke 2:14.

In fact, according to Luke, Jesus' birth also had its share of royal elements. For one thing, Jesus was not born just anywhere. He was born in Bethlehem, the City of David, the hometown of Israel's greatest king, and an angel announced Jesus' birth by saying it was good news to all the people. Not to be outdone, the Gospel of Matthew says that King David is Jesus' ancestor through Joseph. It also says that wise men (or astrologers) came from the East bearing gifts in treasure chests in order to pay homage to the child born "king of the Jews."

So, when Jesus rides into Jerusalem with joyful crowds lining his path, it is a definitely royal scene – one that reprises Zechariah 9:9-10, where the king who shall command peace to the nations enters Jerusalem riding the foal of a donkey. It is, in many respects, exactly what many people have wanted to see. Here is Christ the king, the descendant of mighty David, the savior whose birth was announced by angels, entering the capital city in triumph.

But on closer inspection, a number of things seem odd. In fact, the whole business has been a bit strange from the very beginning. An angel and even a choir of angels announce Jesus' birth, but only to a few shepherds. Two gospels say that, on his father's side, Jesus is descended from Israel's greatest king, David, but they also say Joseph is not Jesus' true father and that Jesus was born out of wedlock in a barn.

The royal entrance into Jerusalem seems equally strange. There is no prince's army and no marching band. There is no flashy stallion, no elegant saddle, no red carpet, and no royal coat of arms. No party of dignitaries comes out to greet Jesus and hand him the keys to the city. He rides into town mounted on a young (borrowed) donkey (Matthew 21:1-7). He sits on the cloaks of his disciples, and the crowds throw their cloaks on his path. (Matthew and John add that they break off branches and throw them onto the ground, too. Hence, Palm Sunday.) The whole thing is an almost comical spoof of a royal procession. Or, perhaps we should say that it's a royal-procession-with-a-difference.

Some years ago at Grace Covenant Church in Richmond, Virginia we used to celebrate Palm Sunday like this. We gathered outside of the building on Monument Avenue with the members of some other area churches. We distributed palms, and then everyone walked around the block past

impressive statues of Robert E. Lee and J. E. B. Stuart on horses. We hoped for a sunny morning, so that the girls and boys in their spring dresses and sport coats would look nice.

But, you know, if we had wanted to reenact a contemporary version of Jesus' entrance as it is portrayed in the Gospels, we would have had to do things differently. For one thing, Monument Avenue, with its respected generals and lieutenants and its stately homes, wouldn't have been the right path. We would have needed to find a road with fewer official heroes and more street people. Some years ago, Grace Street would have done nicely, now perhaps Broad Street. We would also have had to find a young guy – say 30 or so – who had been travelling with friends and was dressed in inexpensive clothes. We would have had to get him to ride in on . . . say the roof of an old powder blue Ford Escort with rusty panels. Maybe he could have been seated on some soiled coats placed on the car by his friends. The street people could then have thrown their coats onto the road for him to drive over. And he could have ridden by waving and acknowledging the cheering crowds as they shouted, "Blessed is the CEO appointed by God! Prosperity and glory in the highest!"

That's not all. Not only is Jesus' entrance into Jerusalem provocative and bizarre – the ramshackle entrance of a beggar king, a rabble-rousing nobody, having yet another good time with crowds of peasants. Not only that. But, as far as the Gospels are concerned, Jesus is entering the royal city not to be ensconced in a palace but to be arrested, condemned, beaten, mocked, and crucified. In fact, in Luke's Gospel, Jesus will ride his borrowed donkey straight up to the national Shrine, straight to the Temple, the central place of established cultural and religious meaning. There, the instigator of the rambunctious street people will (violently) throw-out all of the businessmen who collect money and donations there in order to support the Temple and its religious services. (This will get him in real trouble with the cultural and political elites as surely as would riding a rusted Ford right up to the State House in Richmond and then throwing out the legislators, lobbyists, and tour guides.)

Not too long afterwards, Jesus will be betrayed and arrested. One of the principal charges brought against him will be that he proclaimed himself to be king of the Jews. While he is hanging on the cross, soldiers will mock him saying, "If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself." Over him someone will have affixed a sign reading, "This is the King of the Jews."

And then, not to look too far ahead, yet another strange thing happens. Sometime after his death, Luke tells us that this rabble-rousing failure appeared to his followers, and that they were gathered into a new community and empowered to undertake a mission.

So there you have it. On closer inspection, we find that Jesus is the royal rabble-rousing, bizarre, and civilly disobedient troublemaker, who enters Jerusalem on his way to being executed by the authorities. And, we find that this is the person whom God raises up into glory at God's right hand. We find that Jesus is both an anti-king and a king. He is (to put it mildly) a king-with-a-difference.

We are ready now to consider the really big claim. In its classical and biblical form, it goes something like this: in Jesus Christ, God was reconciling the world to Godself (2 Corinthians 5:19). Here, in this person who was born in a barn and who rides into Jerusalem on a borrowed donkey, is the Word and wisdom of God. This provocative preacher who was born out of wedlock and receives praises from nobodies is the true light that enlightens the world. This anti-king who is nevertheless true is the decisive clue to both God and human existence.

What on earth can it mean? Well, some people say it means that Jesus was a political revolutionary who took aim at powerful oppressors in high places, and that faithfulness to God therefore means participating in the same sort of political revolution. Some say it means that Jesus' kingdom was not of this world and therefore that faithfulness to God has nothing at all to do with politics and business. Some say it means that Jesus is a CEO and that faithfulness means making use of his management style for corporate and commercial success.

What does it mean? Perhaps none of us can be entirely sure. But we do know this: the Gospel of Luke pictures Jesus as a king who is not a king who is a king. That is, when it comes to Jesus, Luke doesn't want to make it too easy for us to see what we want to see. He wants us to catch a glimpse of something different. And so, maybe Schweitzer was onto something after all when he turned his back on widely recognized success and position in Europe in order to furnish needed medical care to people he had never met. At least this seems like an appropriately strange thing for a follower of Jesus to do. Amen.