

More Than A Prophet

Matthew 21:1-11

March 16, 2008 – Palm Sunday

Rev. Chris Cadenhead

Some people think that the point of the Bible is to answer all our questions. But just as important is the Bible's ability to ask questions of us. That is the case on this Palm Sunday morning. Please note that our gospel reading ends with a question. "Who is this?" the people ask as Jesus rides into Jerusalem amid the cheers of the crowd.

It is a good question to ask, given the commotion and controversy that Jesus has created. Though the ministry of this carpenter turned preacher was at first confined to the backwater villages around the Sea of Galilee, his reputation and influence had quickly spread. As he went around teaching and preaching and healing and proclaiming the word about what he called the kingdom of heaven, he began to attract attention, both from people who were drawn to him and from those who were threatened by him. Even the leaders of the people, leaders normally insulated from the day to day goings on of the common folk – even they had to take note of this itinerant rabbi who had nothing except the clothes on his back and a handful of rough-edged, unsophisticated students who followed him around.

As Jesus led these followers on a pilgrimage to the holy city of Jerusalem, the energy surrounding him began to swell. And now that he is approaching the city gates, the energy has reached a crescendo of sorts. Our English translations say that the city was "stirred" by the event. The Greek word there is the same word used to describe what happens in an earthquake. The city is shaken all the way to its foundations by the approach of Jesus. It is only appropriate, then, that the people would ask, "Who is this?" Who is this who causes such uproar? Why are people so worked up by him?

Others in the crowd quickly give an answer. Have you ever noticed how quickly we try to come up with an answer or an explanation when confronted by challenging questions? As soon as possible we want to put everything and everyone in its rightful place. All experiences, all encounters have to be quantified and categorized on the basis of what we already know. It's how we keep our lives neat and tidy. It's just religion, we say - or it's just politics, or it's just psychology. We know. We've seen it all before. There's nothing new here that would change us.

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So, when the question, “Who is this?” comes, an answer quickly follows. “Oh, he is a prophet,” others answer. Now that is an interesting answer. Prophecy is something with which Israel was well acquainted. She had a long history of prophets who had come and pronounced the word of God to her – words of judgment and words of hope. And though the prophetic voice had been silent for the last 300-400 years, the people from one generation to the next had kept that voice alive in their collective memory, especially that voice which had said that God would soon send His anointed One to come and save Israel from her enemies. Israel knew about the prophets. Jesus must be a prophet, they said.

And for good reason, for Jesus’ ministry certainly had a strong prophetic bent to it. Jesus used a lot of words – challenging, authoritative, comforting, and even disturbing words, just like the best of the prophets had done. It is in Matthew, for example, that Jesus delivers the Sermon on the Mount, the single most concentrated collection of Jesus’ teachings anywhere in Scripture. It was there that Jesus told us in straightforward language what the kingdom of heaven is like. Jesus also used words to speak in parables, a form of teaching that uses analogy and story to tease our minds into seeing patterns we otherwise would miss. Earlier prophets had sometimes spoken in metaphor and symbol. And with his words Jesus had challenged the authority and the interpretation of the Pharisees and the other religious leaders. The prophets were always challenging the religious leaders. So, yes, Jesus must be a prophet.

And if Jesus was a prophet come to town, then that would mean that things were about to get interesting around here, for the prophets had always created a stir. Prophets had a way of causing problems, so much so that many of them were either killed or run out of town. John the Baptist, Jesus’ cousin and the first real prophet to come along in centuries – well, he made Herod so mad that he managed to get his head chopped off. Tradition tells us that Isaiah, the prophet who more than any of the others gave people reason to hope for a Messiah – he managed get himself sawed in two. Elijah, you will recall, had to run for his life to escape the wrath of Queen Jezebel.

Some of the prophets of our day haven’t fared much better. Jim Elliot, whose missionary work in the jungles of Central America is the subject of the recent film *End of the*

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Spear, was murdered for telling the natives the truth about the love of Christ. Dietrich Bonhoeffer was murdered for telling the truth about Nazism. Martin Luther King was murdered for telling the truth about racism. Speaking truth has always been a high-risk profession.

So maybe that explains the “stir” in the city that day. Here comes a prophet. Here comes someone who is telling the truth, and truth has a way of stirring things up.

Yes, Jesus speaks the truth. But can we not agree that there comes a time when words alone are not enough – not even true words? Speaking, pronouncing the truth is important, but it can only go so far. As my mentor, Wil Willimon says somewhere, it is one thing to speak the truth. It is another thing to actually do the truth. Speaking truth is a noble thing, but often even after the truth is spoken there remains a huge gap between what is said and what is done.

Our problem is that we live so much of our lives in that gap. To be fair, we may occasionally run into situations that are morally ambiguous – situations where the truth may not be clear – but more often than not we know the truth. Our problem is not a lack of knowledge. Our problem is not a shortage of true words. Our problem is a shortage of true deeds.

According to the most recent issue of Christianity Today, 70% of American men between the ages of 18-34 view pornography on the Internet at least once a month, and that roughly 12 million Americans – both men and women – suffer from some form of sexual addiction. Is it because we are genuinely confused about constitutes sexual purity? I doubt it. “*I tell you,*” Jesus says in Matthew 5, “*that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart.*” That sounds reasonably straightforward. It’s one thing to speak the truth; its another thing to do it.

A little over a month ago we celebrated Valentine’s Day in this country. According to one estimate that I read, the amount of money we spent on candy, flowers, and other Valentine related gifts – that amount of money spent on that one day would be enough to effectively end world hunger. Even if that estimate is off by a few dollars, it suggests that our inability to solve a real world problem is not because of a lack of information. We know that it is feasible to feed every person on the planet. And yet religious pollster George Barna found in 2002 that fewer than 10% of Christians in America tithe. Its one thing to speak the truth; its another to do it.

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In 1989 the Gallup poll conducted a survey of racial attitudes among various demographic groups in America. That poll found that Southern Baptist Christians were the most likely of all the groups surveyed to object to having a black neighbor move in next to them. This, despite all that the Bible has to say about reconciliation and about how in Christ we are all one. Its one thing to speak the truth; its another thing to do it.

“For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate, I do.” That’s how the Apostle Paul would later put in the book of Romans.

So, for all our talk about talk, for all our arguing to make sure the right things get said – to make sure we say the right thing about the Bible, the right thing about the church, the right thing about the world and our relationship to it – for all that, talk alone isn’t enough. Speaking the truth, by itself, won’t necessarily close the gap between where we are and where we need to be. The gap is too wide, our wills are too perverted. Yes, Jesus is a prophet, a truth teller. But as bad we need prophets among us, as important as it is that truth gets spoken, a prophet alone can’t save us. A prophet can show us the gap in which we live, but a prophet lacks the power to close it.

The good news is that while the crowd gave a right answer that day to their own question, it was only partially right. Jesus is a prophet of God, but as the events of the coming week will show, he is more than a prophet. What the events of Holy Week reveal, and what the church professes, is that Jesus is more than just a prophet for God. He is God. He is the one who has come into the world to do for us what we for all our high sounding words cannot do for ourselves. He is the One, the only One, who has come to close the gap between where we are and where we need to be. He is the One who has come to close the gap between God and us.

The inadequacy of the crowd’s answer begins to shine through in the very next episode that Matthew reports. As soon as Jesus entered into town the first thing he did was to go down to the temple. Matthew says that when he saw people buying and selling he turned over all the tables and ran the moneychangers out. It’s easy to mischaracterize that event. The popular interpretation of the temple episode is that Jesus was angered by the greed and the opportunism of folk trying to make a buck off the worship of God.

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But that's not really what the text says. The moneychangers were doing what could be considered a legitimate business. For one thing, Israel's sacrificial code was stringent. It required certain kinds of animals to be sacrificed in certain ways. But for people who came to Jerusalem on pilgrimage – as Jesus and his followers had done – it wasn't very feasible or practical to bring the right animals with you. The merchants in the Temple made it possible for pilgrims to purchase the right animals.

Furthermore, Roman currency was stamped with an image of the Emperor and an inscription that read, "Caesar is Lord." Well, no self-respecting Jew would dare make a contribution to the Temple with those blasphemous words engraved on it. The moneychangers provided a way for worshipers to convert their Roman coins to another variety that would be acceptable. In other words, they made it possible for people to participate in Temple life. They made it possible for people to get close to God.

But when Jesus flipped over the tables and ran the vendors out he was declaring to all present that a new way of getting close to God was now opening up before them. No longer would the people's relationship to God be based in a system that kept them permanently stuck in that distance between where they were and where they needed to be. In him, the gap was being closed.

Do you see the difference? All a prophet can do is point us to a new reality. Isaiah can point us to the suffering servant who will come to bring comfort to God's people. Amos can tell us all about justice flowing down like a mighty river. But neither Isaiah nor Amos have the ability in themselves to actualize that new reality. But Jesus not only points us to the new reality; in him that new reality is coming into existence right before our very eyes! Jesus is more than a prophet. He is the One who comes to close the gap. It is one thing to speak the truth; it is another to do the truth.

It is another thing still to actually *be* the truth.

I think it is no accident that as the events of the coming week unfold, Jesus will have less and less to say. At the beginning of the week there will be some more parables to say and some more debates with the leaders of the people, but once Thursday comes and Jesus is arrested he

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will become eerily silent. Jesus the prophet goes mute. Other than a terse answer or two to the questions put to him by the Sanhedrin and by Pilate, Jesus has little to say. There are no more sermons, no more parables, no more teachable moments to capture with just the right words. In the moment of crisis when his life is hanging in the balance, Jesus doesn't even say anything to defend himself. It is as though words have become futile. All the truth that ever needed to be spoken already has been. In the moment of crisis, Jesus stops speaking truth to us so that he can be focus on being the truth for us.

I'll confess that as a preacher it is hard to know what to say to you on Palm Sunday. It's such a peculiar day on the church calendar. The day has a triumphal feel to it. Jesus has made his triumphal entry. And yet, a dark shadow hangs over this day, because we already know that things will turn sour. There is ugliness and death looming ahead. So, what are we supposed to do with this day? Should we feel glad and happy that Jesus has arrived? Should we feel sad that he now goes to his death? Should we feel guilty that we are the ones who have sent him there? Should we feel a little of it all? Well, given all we've said about the inadequacy of words, maybe we should drop the word "should" from the conversation this morning. Maybe what you need this morning is not a moral lesson in what you should feel or what you should do, because the words of a preacher can't make any of that happen anyway. When it is all said and done, more will be said than done. What you need, what I need, what this world needs is not more words about God. What we need is God. What we need is the One – the only One – who can take us where we need to be, the only One who can save us from our inability to save ourselves.

Hosanna in the highest. Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord.

Amen.