



## ***Palm Sunday: The Obscured Savior***

A Sermon for Northminster Church

Preached by Zachary Helton

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### **Luke 19:28b-44**

Jesus went ahead with the ascent to Jerusalem.

29 Approaching Bethphage and Bethany, near what is called the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two of the disciples with these instructions: 30 “Go into the village ahead of you. Upon entering it, you’ll find a tethered colt that no one has yet ridden. Untie it and lead it back. 31 If anyone should ask you, ‘Why are you untying it?’ say, ‘The Rabbi needs it.’ ” 32 They departed on their errand and found things just as Jesus had said. 33 As they untied the colt, its owners said to them, “Why are you doing that?” 34 They explained that the Rabbi needed it. 35 Then the disciples led the animal to Jesus and, laying their cloaks on it, helped him mount. 36 People spread their cloaks on the roadway as Jesus rode along. 37 As they reached the descent from the Mount of Olives, the entire crowd of disciples joined them and began to rejoice and praise God loudly for the display of power they had seen, saying, 38 “Blessed is the King who comes in the name of our God! Peace in heaven, and glory in the highest!” 39 Some of the Pharisees in the crowd said to Jesus, “Teacher, rebuke your disciples!” 40 Jesus replied, “I tell you, if they were to keep silent, the very stones would cry out!”

I get the impression that when this gospel was written, the author spent a *lot* of time on this particular story. Just about every image points us to something: a scripture reference, a political reference, a subversive jab at something... every word seems intentionally placed to create a portrait that one could stare at for hours and only begin to get a handle on. Press pause on this moment, this dramatic moment right as Jesus rides over the summit of the Mount of Olives and all of his disciples burst into song, throwing their robes for his donkey to walk on. Put

a frame around it, in all its splendor, and let your eyes explore the scene. In the center, of course, there is Jesus in his tattered clothes, riding on a bewildered borrowed donkey, his eyes at once kind and resolved. Moving out a little, there are the disciples, wide smiles on their faces, flinging their cloaks on the road to prepare the way for their liberating King. Moving out a bit more, down nearer the bottom of the mountain, near the corners of the frame you'd see the Pharisees, gatekeepers to the great city and its great religion. They are well dressed, arms crossed, furrowed eyebrows of disapproval at the rowdy display, and upon second glance, a good bit of fear that the Romans might notice and somehow they'll catch the brunt of it. And yes, the Romans, at the very edge, eyes on the scene from every angle, almost making up the frame itself. The Roman Empire notices the scene, mostly unphased, but with a hint of suspicion, wondering whether they care enough to be offended at this mockery of their custom. As we take in these characters, surrounding Jesus from every side, eyes focused on what's going on, there is one thing in particular that stands out to me: no one except the man in the center on the colt on top of the mountain seems to have any idea what's actually going on. If you look, you can almost see it, the obscuring lenses through which their eyes try to focus on Jesus. Each of them is so totally caught up in their own perception of what's going on, they're so quick to cast Jesus as a supporting character in their own default, unexamined story, that they fail to touch the true nature of that moment, the Reality that challenges and transcends their stories and perceptions. Everyone, from the top of the portrait to the bottom, wind up totally missing the point.

A wise teacher once said that when we look at a flower, we're looking at ourselves as much as we're looking at the flower. The flower we see is the object of *our* perception, and the truth is, you can't separate object and perception. We're looking at any object through the lens of our own consciousness, in the context of the stories we assume to be unfolding,[1] and I don't know if this is a shortcoming so much as it's a given. It's not something to be fought so much as something to be noticed, to be mindful of, because the more aware of it we become, the more we become awakened to ourselves, our habitual perceptions, our stories complete with their own biases, fears, desires, and so on... the more aware of this we are, the more we are able to look past them to see, to touch the true nature of the flower itself. This is true for each of us, for every relationship and in every moment, and as we stare at this so-call Triumphal Entry scene, we see that it's just as true for them. On that day, they proved they were so unaware of themselves, so un-open to experience Jesus' presence, that they missed it.

Don't hear me wrong, when I say, "they missed it," or "they missed the point," or "they couldn't touch what was really happening," I don't just mean they missed out on *knowing* what was right, that they didn't have their facts straight. For too long, Christianity has been an exercise in *knowing* the right answers, but Christianity is a practice. It's the practice of connection to the Spirit of Love, of recognizing letting go of oneself to be transformed by God in the Way of Christ. What we *know* about Jesus is only as good as it serves that purpose. So, when I say, "they miss it," or "we miss it because of our unexamined perceptions and stories," what I mean is they have put walls of their own making between themselves and Jesus' Reality. They refuse to open themselves to that which has the power to give them Life, to free them from their fears and teach them Love.

So, in this Palm Sunday portrait, let us scan the frame and be mindful of the particular habitual ways they "miss it," and in so doing we may be able to shine the light of mindfulness on the ways we miss it as well.

First, there is Rome, barely perceptible in this scene, not directly mentioned, but again, making up the frame that surrounds the whole picture. The backdrop of this scene is colored by the domination of the Roman Empire, and here's what you have to know about the color of their story: Rome was built on a story that claimed peace was only possible through war, through violent domination of the enemy. In other words, in that story, there is *us* and there is *them*, and when *they* become a threat, *we* must use violence to get *them* under control until there is "peace." Then, when the *other* is beaten and subdued, *we* are safe, and this doesn't sound all that crazy, does it? It's a logic that was and still is largely assumed to be true, and so deeply held, most of us don't bother trying to imagine if it could even be different. And really, it's hard to argue with the fact that it seems to work! Rome was, and the United States is, at the end of the day remarkably powerful, and seem to be enjoyed long stretches of peace. *But* that story, this perception of how the world works, prevents Rome, and I suspect many of us today, from being open to see what Jesus is trying to do. While Rome is sacrificing their citizens to the bloody god of war, they have little interest in the kinds of questions Jesus' life poses. Questions like: Are we really that different from the *other*, the ones we are fighting? Does God treat them any differently or love them any less, does the rain not fall on both of us? If we dehumanize and subdue everyone we deem to be a *them*, is it really peace, or are we just temporarily slowing down the wheel of violence while they, or some other group, get ready to try and beat us? In short, does this domination story even work? We've been turning this wheel of violence for a

long time and it doesn't show any signs of stopping. Is a more real Peace available to us, more than just subdued conflict? But Rome is not interested in these questions, most Americans aren't interested in these questions. They assume they already know the most effective way to peace, and so they don't care much for the chance to touch actual Peace, God, the Reality of Love that ends war... they miss it.

Then, back in the shaded corners of the frame, there are the Pharisees, those gospel villains. Arms crossed, their faces scowl in disapproval and fear. "Rabbi," they rebuke him, "get your disciples under control! Don't you hear what they're saying about you? Don't you know it's blasphemy? On top of that, do you really want the Romans hearing them calling you King?" And you know they miss the point, because even Jesus pushes back. "If they were silent, the rocks themselves would cry out about what's going on today!" For the Pharisees, their story was a story of fear-based purification. If only we can get rid of everything that is bad, if we can get rid of sin and get rid of all those who don't live up to our standards, then we would have peace. The Pharisees rule by shame and judgement of *them*, the *others*, the ones on the outside, who dare question the laws that keep the peace. And again, this story is compelling! If we can just get rid of the ones causing us the problems, we will live in peace... until, that is, all of *them* are gone but we find we have failed to solve the problems in our own hearts, and that for some reason we still suffer even once they're gone. The Pharisees saw Jesus through the lens of this story, they saw him as one of *them*, offensive to God and questioning the laws that bring peace... but there it is again, that same illusion of peace. They call it peace, but when their religious system fails to address the problem of their own ego, when it is set up to devour the poor for profit, when it causes suffering, isolation, and endless, life-destroying guilt by shaming everyone who can't possibly live up to their perfect standards... is that really peace, or does the conflict just become an invisible poison eating us from the inside? And so, in their fear of corrupting their perfect religion, in their ego-driven failure to face their own issues, in their fear of losing control, in their fear of making God angry, God walks right in front of them, and they miss it. They look right at the flower, and all they can see is their own fear. They miss it.

And then, as our eyes continue to move up the canvas, they settle on those glowing characters closest to Jesus, rolling out the red carpet with their own clothes. These were his disciples, his closest friends. These were the ones who lived their lives in the presence of embodied, unconditional Love, and if we expect anyone to get it, it's them! They're the ones we emulate every year with our palm branches and our shouts of "Hosanna!" These folks are ready

to accept Jesus as their King, the liberator of the people! To them, this is *the people's* Triumphal Entry, a piece of political theater against flashy Roman triumphal entries, recognizing the one who is *really* powerful, who God will use to liberate the oppressed and downtrodden! When the disciples look at Jesus, they see Jesus the revolutionary... and this is where even they miss the point. The story through which they see Jesus is this: We don't like the violent and oppressive ones in power, so we need to violently subdue and get rid of *them* and then we'll be in power, and have peace! And there it is again, the peace that is not really peace at all. The peace that is just one more turning of the wheel of violence, domination, and counter-domination that just keeps rolling on and crushing all of us on either side. It just keeps on taking an eye for an eye until the whole world stumbles around, totally blind. It turns out, they're playing the same human, *us* and *them* ego-game as Rome. And if there is any doubt, they prove this is the game they're playing a few days later when their King is arrested and humiliated, and they scatter to the winds, nowhere to be found, because even from their vantage point near the top of the mountain, they missed it.

But then there, in the center of the canvas, at the top of the mountain, we see the focal point, riding on his donkey. His eyes glow with love for everyone around him, all over the picture, all those who are too certain of who he is to see him at all. Jesus is interested in Peace. Actual Peace. Not just the Roman's or disciples' story of *us* beating *them*, but abolishing those dehumanizing categories entirely. Jesus is interested in teaching us to see God in *them* in such a way that confronts injustice with grace, and stops the wheel of violence from rolling altogether. He's not interested in the Pharisee's story of purifying the world by pointing out the dust in everyone's eye. He's interested in being the change we want to see by focusing on removing the log from our own. Jesus is telling a very different kind of story, one in which the main character is Love, the Divine, and all who open themselves are supporting characters. Day after day he's been living out his new story in the countryside, forming imaginations, breaking barriers, pushing back against oppressive religion, and now, on this march toward Jerusalem, he's putting his money where his mouth is. He so believes in his story of Love that he is willing to carry it into the belly of the beast, to bring it into the most public and most political high-stakes arena. It is there that he intends to prove it, to prove that his story is wide enough to embrace the worst of the world's fear and suffering and hold it in such a way that loves a new humanity into being, a humanity that is capable of real, true, lasting Peace... but in this tableau, on this festive portrait

of the amount of Olives, no one can see it yet. They are so caught up in, and so ignorant of their own stories, they miss it.

And they're not the only ones. The Palm Sunday story is bigger than just that one day outside of Jerusalem. The fame expands to include every story of every person whose perceptions have ever kept them from seeing Jesus as he is. It embraces all those whose stories have kept them from being open to hearing the new story that Love is trying to tell, even you and me. Now, am I arguing for some kind of objective, modern, certain take on exactly who Jesus was or what he is doing? No. Love manifests differently in every eye and in every heart, and if it keeps looking different to each of us, we're doing it right. *But*, I am saying that when we do that vulnerable work of becoming aware of our own perceptions, of the default stories we're living out (stories of domination, purification, revolution, whatever), becoming aware of that which separates us from Life Eternal, when we do that, the flower we see will forever transform us. It will liberate us. It will teach us Peace. Don't miss it.

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[1] Thich Nhat Hanh, *The Heart of the Buddha's Teachings*