

**The Beginning of the End – John 12:12-19 – April 9, 2017**  
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The Triumphal Entry of Jesus into Jerusalem is a story that is recorded in all four gospels and each writer puts his distinctive touches on it. Last week we considered the event of the raising of Lazarus. John tells us that it was this incident that triggered the plot to kill Jesus. Several people had born witness to this amazing event and many of them, because of what they had seen, believed in Jesus. But others of them were troubled by it and went to the Pharisees to tell them what had happened.

The religious leaders called a quick meeting of the Sanhedrin, the ruling council. Their concern was, if Jesus kept carrying on like this, performing signs and miracles, he would continue to gain converts. They believed that the Romans would not take too kindly to this. They thought Rome might retaliate by coming in by force, destroying the Temple and the nation. The Romans had given the Jewish leaders quite a bit of freedom to do as they liked, as long as there was no trouble. They were in a comfortable position and they did not want to risk losing that comfort by some rabble-rouser who might just stir up the people to rebellion.

Furthermore, the raising of Lazarus by Jesus was a challenge to their own religious authority. Jesus was redefining what it meant to live in relationship to God. The raising of Lazarus demonstrated that Jesus' claims about his unity with God were true. Back in chapter 11 of the gospel of John Jesus had said to Lazarus' sister Martha, "I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die."

Jesus' gift of life redefines the power of death. Jesus has been given by God the power over death. No longer can death separate us from God, because Jesus offers the gift of eternal life. But furthermore, by believing in Jesus now, we are given the opportunity to know the fullness of God's love and live our lives grounded in that love. Through our relationship with Jesus as his followers we can experience the love and power of God Incarnate. It is available to us now.

Jesus had told his disciples that Lazarus' illness was not for death but instead, to show God's glory. And by raising him, Jesus showed that he shared God's power for giving life and that he was the embodiment of God's promises. As you can imagine, this troubled the Sanhedrin, the Jewish religious leaders. And they were willing to do anything to suppress something that both challenged their authority and potentially could cause trouble with Rome. Even if that meant putting a man to death.

The chief priest, who led the council, a man named Caiaphas, made this statement, "You do not understand that it is better for you to have one man die for the people than to have the whole nation destroyed." He thought that getting rid of the one person who just might stir the people up enough to cause a commotion would solve their problems. Killing Jesus would keep Rome out of their hair. And allow them to keep their place of comfort. And maintain their religious authority over the people.

It didn't matter to them if what Jesus was doing was right or not. They did not want to sacrifice their privileged position with the Roman authorities or their own security as the religious leaders. They did not want to lose their power and authority. Better to suppress the truth, than risk losing everything. Little did Caiaphas know the true significance of his words. Because, in fact, Jesus WAS planning on giving up his life for the nation, and not only for the nation but for the whole world.

And so that brings us to the events of Palm Sunday, what is known as the Triumphal Entry into Jerusalem. This was the time of the Jewish Passover and the Festival of Unleavened Bread. It was a time for pilgrims to travel from their homes to the big city. In the Passover festival, the Israelites remembered how God had brought them out of Egypt and out of slavery. A critical point in their history.

As you can imagine, the crowds were huge. Hundreds of thousands of people thronged the city and the surrounding area. Reports and stories about Jesus had already multiplied among the people. And word of Jesus' arrival began to spread like wildfire. The crowd that had witnessed the raising of Lazarus had come along with Jesus, and a crowd of folks who were already at the festival heard he was coming, so they went out to meet him.

Those who came to meet Jesus brought with them palm branches and began waving them in the air. The palm branch symbolized national victory and triumph. Along the way, the people shouted to him, "Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord." This line came from Psalm 118, a psalm of victory. These details seem minor, but they point to the expectation of the crowd that Jesus would be their national savior, that he had come to restore God's kingdom to their nation.

They had heard the stories about him, heard what he could do. They were tired of living under the oppressive hand of Rome. They wanted their freedom. And they were looking for someone to lead a rebellion. They figured that Jesus was the one – all the signs seemed to point to him. So the people were looking to Jesus as God's Anointed One, the Deliverer and the Conqueror. It was this particular reaction and expectation by the crowd that worried the religious leaders. It corroborated their fear about how Rome would respond to Jesus' popularity. Without a doubt, Rome would retaliate if the Jewish people started rebelling. And that made the leaders nervous.

The people wished for a warrior king who would lead them against the Romans. They couldn't see, they couldn't even imagine, the kind of Messiah that God had sent, riding a donkey and bringing peace and new life. Throughout his ministry, Jesus had drawn a vivid portrait of what type of Messiah he was, but no one was able to understand what he meant. Once all the events of the Passion had taken place, the disciples would be able to look back over all that Jesus had said and done and finally understand. Until then they would remain confused. Until then they saw only what they wanted to see.

I wonder if sometimes we do the same thing. Expecting God to function according to the picture of God we have created in our own minds. What does that picture look like? Perhaps we envision a God that will protect us from all physical harm. Or a God who will bless us with material wealth and success. Or a God who favors one group of people or an entire nation over others.

We often create God in our own image – an image that inflates our own self-importance, to the detriment of others. We imagine a God who wishes us to be happy, healthy and financially secure while not giving a second thought to all the people who lack even the basic necessities for life. We want a God who will smite all who disagree with our own version of the truth. We want a God who will look past our minor indiscretions but who will punish those on whom we cast judgment.

We don't want a God who loves everyone equally, or demands that we care for the poor, or calls us to share the bounty of this earth equally with all people. We don't want a God who offers grace freely to all people, even those "nasty, lazy sinners who are just looking for a handout." Or a God whose forgiveness of others goes against the petty grudges we hold. We don't want a God who favors humility, love and compassion above strength, power and success. We quickly grab our victory palm branches and hop on the bandwagon as it parades by.

The scripture passage ends with the Pharisees nervously saying to one another, "You see, you can do nothing. Look, the world has gone after him!" In their helplessness and frustration, the Pharisees threw up their hands in defeat and disgust. Their vision of God was one who accepted the status quo. As long as they retained their positions of security, it didn't matter to them that the Jewish people were suffering and in bondage. This Jesus threatened their well-being, and he needed to be stopped. Order was preferable to chaos. Of course, like the crowds, they too were wrong in their assessment of Jesus.

There is one other thing we should note about this entry into Jerusalem. Jesus knew exactly what he was doing. He was aware that he was a wanted man. He knew that traveling into Jerusalem would bring him under the authority of the Sanhedrin. Going there was a huge risk to his safety. If he were concerned about his well-being he would have avoided coming to the Passover Festival. Or if he absolutely had to come, he could have easily found a way to enter the city in secret. But no. He came into the city with a crowd on his heels and them shouting his praises. He knew that he would gain negative attention after all this fuss. He chose to follow this path. That certainly does not mean that it was easy for him. But he knew his time had come.

In the event of the raising of Lazarus, Jesus showed forth God's glory. And demonstrated his God-given power of life over death. For many, this event inspired devotion and belief. In others it had elicited fear, hatred and the formation of a deadly and calculated plan to take his life. Jesus didn't go running for the hills. Instead, he made his way into the city of Jerusalem. His eyes were on the path before him. His love was focused on the world around him. The cross was looming large, but the empty tomb was on the horizon.