

“Will the Real Messiah Please Stand Up?”

John 12:12-19

Series: Face to Face with Jesus

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It's Palm Sunday. While the family gets ready for church, Mom discovers 5-year-old Jimmy has a sore throat. "Why don't you go ahead to church and I'll stay home with Jimmy." When Dad and the other kids return home, they carry several palm fronds. "Why do you have those?" poor Jimmy croaks out with his hoarse voice. "People waved them over Jesus' head as he rode in on the donkey," his sister Amy says. "Wouldn't you know it," Jimmy fumes, "the one Sunday I don't go, Jesus shows up."

Today, Palm Sunday, we celebrate Jesus' triumphant entry into Jerusalem. This day inaugurates the last week of Jesus' life. This is the beginning of the end of Jesus' ministry. On the first Palm Sunday, they were the opposite of Jimmy. On that day Jesus really did show up and they *were* there. Yet like Jimmy, they still miss Him. They throw a parade for the wrong person. They expect someone else. They cheer for a different Messiah. We also can miss Jesus. He may not be the Messiah we seek.

Palm Sunday is actually the end of the parade. In the Gospel of John, a sense of expectation and excitement ramps up right from the start. In several face-to-face meetings with the Messiah, Jesus talks about an hour or a time that is to come. A drumbeat starts at the beginning of the Gospel and it's picking up speed.

- At the Wedding of Cana, Jesus says to His mother: "My time has not yet come." (John 2:4).
- To His brothers who try to force Him to go to Jerusalem, Jesus says, "The right time for me has not yet come" (John 7:6).
- Opposition mounts. "At this they tried to seize him, but no one laid a hand on him, because his time had not yet come" (John 7:30).
- After He frees the woman caught in adultery they turn up the heat. "Yet no one seized him, because his time had not yet come" (John 8:20).
- Finally, "It was just before the Passover Feast. Jesus knew that the time had come for him to leave this world and go to the Father" (John 13:1).

Time is running short. The hour approaches. Jesus knows what awaits Him in the Holy City. Yet He never turns aside from His mission. The parade is picking up speed. Clueless about what lies ahead, the disciples march along. Crowds from Galilee and Judea join the throng. Soon the pilgrimage looks like an army advancing on Jerusalem. They make the long, steep ascent from Jericho to the summit of the Mount of Olives. Spread out before them is a beautiful panoramic view of Jerusalem with the Temple gleaming in the brilliant sun. Jesus seizes this teachable moment. Finding a young

donkey, he rides the humble beast into the valley. Through this simple act, Jesus announces He is the Messiah. He fulfills the words of the prophet Zechariah.

Rejoice greatly, O Daughter of Zion! Shout, Daughter of Jerusalem! See, your king comes to you, righteous and having salvation, gentle and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey. I will take away the chariots from Ephraim and the war-horses from Jerusalem, and the battle bow will be broken. He will proclaim peace to the nations. His rule will extend from sea to sea and from the River to the ends of the earth. (Zechariah 9:9-10).

And the people get it. Suddenly all the pent up emotion, all the effervescent expectation explodes like a champagne cork from a shook up bottle.

“Hosanna!” “Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!” “Blessed is the King of Israel!” (John 12:13).

“Our King has come!” they shout. “The centuries of waiting are over! The Messiah is here!” They cut and wave palm branches as a sign of victory, a ceremony to welcome a warrior who will triumph over tyranny and oppression. They sing the words of Psalm 118: “Hosanna” which means “Save us.” Finally, Jesus enters the mighty gates of Jerusalem. The city dwellers ask, “Who’s that? What’s going on?” “This is Jesus of Nazareth,” his disciples reply. Many join in the throng. Yet with the adoration, there is also strong opposition in the city. Some Pharisees complain, “See, this is getting us nowhere. Look how the whole world has gone after him!” (John 12:19).

Yet there is something wrong on Main Street. In spite of all the excitement, enthusiasm and expectation, the crowds misunderstand Jesus’ message. They are expecting someone else. Jesus does not turn out to be the Messiah they want. Even two thousand years later we still place our trust in other Messiahs. Let’s examine who the Jews are expecting. Let’s ask the question, “Will the Real Messiah Please Stand Up?”

Messiah #1: A King like David. One group of Jews called the Zealots rebel against the Romans. These underground guerillas plot ways to overthrow them. They long for a general on a war horse who will drive out the imperial forces, reclaim the throne of his father David and reign forever over a kingdom stretching from sea to sea. All other nations will bow to God’s Messiah. Israel will be number one in the world.

Now let’s face it, we still want that kind of leader: someone who will make our nation #1 in the world. As the last Superpower we don’t want to lose our position and power. And there is always someone to fear: the Fascists, the Communists, the Fundamentalists Terrorists, the Cyber Terrorists. Now hear me friends. This is not about economics, politics or patriotism. It’s about selfish pride. The people of Israel had their pride. The Romans had their pride. The Russians, Japanese, Germans and Chinese have their pride and we have our pride. Being proud to be an American is one thing. But pride that puffs up your ego and drives you to dominate is another. Pride breaks up relationships, divides marriages and families. Pride poisons the workplace. Pride holds grudges and won’t forgive. Pride sends ethnic groups, religions and nations to war.

Jesus is not that kind of King. He did not come in on a horse, the symbol of war, but a humble donkey, the symbol of peace. He did not come with a column of soldiers but a crowd of common people. His arrival is not announced with trumpets but with the voices of children. And what is the first thing Jesus does when He sees Jerusalem? He weeps. He knows selfish pride blinds the people of the Holy City. Jesus cries out,

If you, even you, had only known on this day what would bring peace – but now it is hidden from your eyes. The days will come upon you when your enemies will build an embankment against you and encircle you and hem you in on every side. They will dash you to the ground...they will not leave one stone on another. Luke 19:42-44

Jesus is not the kind of King they want. It only takes them a week to figure it out and dispose of Him. Their pride causes them to turn their “King” over to the enemy. A century later, they get their warrior Messiah too. His name is Simeon Bar Kokhba. He claims to be a descendant of David. He calls himself “prince.” The leading Rabbi of the time Akiva ben Yosef declares he is the Messiah. What happens? In AD 135 the Romans kill him, wipe out resistance, and level Jerusalem just as Jesus predicted. Do we want to put all our hope and trust in a strong warrior king? Will the real Messiah please stand up?

Messiah #2: A Prophet like Moses. In his farewell speech Moses said,

The LORD your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among your own brothers. You must listen to him. Deuteronomy 18:15

One group which longs for such a Messiah is the Pharisees. They spend endless hours studying the Law of Moses. They believe if God’s people obey the whole Law for just one day, the Lord will be obligated to send the Messiah. So they layer rules upon rules to cover every possible sin one could commit.

The Law says they are forbidden to work on the Sabbath. In Shabbat Tractate 141-145 the rabbis agree it is a sin to lift a stone on the Sabbath because that would be work. Ah, but what about a child? Is it work to lift a crying child on the Sabbath? No, that’s not work because the child is longing for the parent. But, the rabbis debate, what if the child is holding a stone in his hand when you pick him up? Is that work?

Can one scrape clay off of a shoe (on Shabbat)? One rabbi says scraping on the ground is allowed but not on a wall, lest it be construed as “building.” Raba responds that you’d look like quite a dumb builder to be adding clay to a wall like that, so he allows one to scrape off clay on a wall but not on the ground, lest one level a hole that way! A third rabbi allows both, and a fourth allows neither, only letting him use a piece of wood.¹

On and on the Pharisees argue over every possible application of the Law. They want a Prophet like Moses to tell them exactly what to do to be righteous before God.

¹ <http://apikorostalmud.blogspot.com/2005/09/survey-shabbat-141-145-sept-20-24.html>

We long for a similar Messiah – a great and influential teacher to tell us what to do. Who are the prophets today? It depends on who you talk to. Every year Time Magazine lists the 100 most influential people. They include leaders in business, politics, entertainment, sports and science. The top ten most trending celebrities according to Google searches in 2021 were:

10. Kylie Jenner, 9. Ariana Grande, 8. BTS, 7. Meghan Markle, 6. Kim Kardashian
5. Scarlett Johansson, 4. Elon Musk, 3. Megan Fox, 2. Cristiano Ronaldo, 1. Britney Spears

These latter day prophets tell us how to live, work, raise our families, invest our money and so on. Some think they know how to live because they are rich, beautiful, powerful and popular. Their souls must be satisfied. They seem to hold the world in their hands. For Jesus, that's not the goal of life.

What good is it for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul? Or what can anyone give in exchange for their soul? Mark 8:36-37

Often, to gain even a small piece of the world, you have to sell your soul, stuff your soul or starve your soul. When you sell your soul you give up your beliefs, your ethics, your priorities to get something from the world. When you stuff your soul you feed on spiritual junk food the world dishes out. When you starve your soul you deny yourself the spiritual nourishment God freely gives. The end result for all three is the same: you lose your soul.

Jesus tells us to do the opposite: surrender your soul and follow Him. Wealth leads astray. Beauty decays. Philosophies fade. The prophets of this world come and go like the wind and not one of them can save us. Will the Real Messiah Please Stand Up?

Messiah #3: A Priest Like Aaron. There is a third group of Jews called the Sadducees. They are the upper class conservative leaders of Jerusalem. The Chief Priests, lawyers and scribes of the Temple are mostly Sadducees. They collaborate with the Romans to keep their religious power. They prefer the status quo. The Messiah they want is a High Priest who will keep it that way.

Yet Jesus isn't that kind of High Priest. He shakes up the religious establishment in Jerusalem and throws the merchants and money changers out of the Temple. This angers the religious leaders some of whom make a profit off God's house. So those who lead the worship of God set out to destroy the Son of God. Over the years we've seen just how imperfect religious leaders can be: pastors, priests, televangelists. When I was in high school a congregation thought their pastor was perfect. He helped the poor and preached fantastic sermons. His people would follow him anywhere. And they did ... to South America where the Rev. Jim Jones served a chilling communion service of cyanide flavored Kool-Aid to over 900 disciples who all died.

Will the Real Messiah Please Stand Up? Over thousands of years of human history we have seen warrior Kings, inspiring Prophets and holy Priests come and go and come and go. We follow them. We trust them until they fail us and then cast them aside and look for another to follow. Not one of them, in all of history, has ever saved us. But when the Real Messiah comes He's not the King, Prophet or Priest we want. When the

Real Messiah finally stands up we parade Him out of the city. When the Real Messiah finally stands up we nail Him to a Cross!

By the standards of the world He is an utter failure. Jesus is not the Messiah we want. But when we look at the Cross we see He is the Messiah we need. He is a King: not a king that spills blood and conquers lands, but the King who sheds his own blood to conquer death. He is a Prophet: not a prophet who gives pious advice but the Prophet who reveals the Truth of God's Love. He is a Priest: not a priest who performs endless rituals, but the Great High Priest who offers His life as a sacrifice to set us free.

Life is a parade. The question is: who are you following? Which Messiah is leading you? Years ago there was a big Vietnam Veterans parade in Chicago. One amazing feature of the procession was a mobile version of the entire Vietnam Veterans Memorial Wall in Washington D.C. Like the original, it bore the names of all the soldiers who died in that long war. A news commentator asked one marcher why he came all the way to Chicago to visit the memorial and walk in the parade.

The soldier looked straight into the face of the reporter and with tears flowing down his face said, "Because of this man right here." As the soldier talked, he pointed to the name of a friend that was etched in the wall. He traced the letters of his friend's name in the wall. "This man right here gave his life for me. He gave his life for me." As the news clip ended, the sobbing soldier let the tears flow as he stood there tracing the name of his friend with his finger.²

The Real Messiah is standing up. His name is Jesus.

Will you follow Him?

² Lee Eclov, in the sermon "Blasphemy!" PreachingToday.com