

St. Andrew's UMC, Sacramento
April 5, 2020
Matthew 21:1-11
"This Is The Prophet Jesus"

(Today we ponder about what people want from Jesus.)

Who is this that enters Jerusalem on a teetering colt? Why are the people welcoming him as if he is a king victoriously returning from a campaign? What has he done to deserve this ardent welcome? What do they know about him?

These are the questions that might have been triggered in the minds of the observers who visited Jerusalem for the occasion of Passover celebration from far and abroad. Indeed, people do not welcome a total stranger, and treat him like a victorious hero, unless they know something about what he has done—or, unless they expect to get something they want.

The fact that this crowd identified Jesus as a prophet tells us something about the Jews who welcomed him: they expected that Jesus would do something a prophet would do for God's people. Prophet is the one who tells people what God wills. The people are expected to follow God's will. Usually, God's will does not inspire excitement and welcome in the hearts of the people. "Why not?", you ask.

When God sends a prophet to people, it is usually the message of "Shape up, or ship out." God demands repentance of sins and restitution of damages from people, so that the nations will live in harmony, peace, and justice.

Since the people welcomed Jesus so enthusiastically, we can imagine that they expected to hear the prophecy that was sweet to their ears. And what could that be? The people expected that Jesus would restore the old glory of Israel in the time of the Davidic dynasty, and drive out the unclean Gentiles that trampled and oppressed their nation.

The crowd welcomed Jesus, because they expected him to give them what they wanted. They expected Jesus to do everything they wanted, but all they did was waving the palm branches. They expected Jesus to do everything they wanted, while they sat on their hands, so to speak.

If this sounded harsh to the crowd, then we can ask this question: "Where were they, when Jesus was arrested and nailed to the cross to die?" We do not see anyone doing anything for Jesus, but we hear the deafening cries of "Crucify him! Crucify him!" only a few days later.

When the crowd saw their expectation crumble with the arrest of Jesus, they either fell silent or turned into a lynching mob. To them, Jesus failed to deliver what they wanted, and they lashed out in pain. The true color emerges, when people are put to bitter disappointment and deep fear. So we see the similar behaviors in today's crowd. The Coronavirus is teasing out the true

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colors in people, while transforming the world as nothing has done before.

Bill Gates pointed out one thing about the Coronavirus: "fairness." Everyone wants fairness vaguely, but no one likes fairness which the Coronavirus forced it to play out. Those who seek equality want it for the betterment of life; but they never expect that fairness also includes accepting tragedy visiting people "equally" on random basis, not because of one's status, race, gender, wealth, connection, education, or looks. The true equality is one in which everyone is given the equal opportunity for both the benefit and malady.

The news article showed the picture of Putin wearing heaviest protective gear above all others in his entourage, for fear of getting infected from Coronavirus. That is one picture that tells more than a thousand words can about inequality and partiality of this world. Even the second strongest man in the world appeared more scared, far more than a lowly cashier at Walmart.

But then again, there were people who proclaimed fairness, or equal opportunity, well ahead of anyone, a long time ago: that God does not practice partiality.

An equal opportunity to be saved was proclaimed, to teach people about God and God's impartiality. God's justice, love, and grace have been available for free to anyone who seeks it. Jesus called it the kingdom of God, and Jesus was killed for

teaching people that truth; and the Early Christians were persecuted for witnessing to that good news.

The Coronavirus may not make disciples of Christ, but it sure is transforming the world, far more effectively than the United Methodists whose mission statement is: "Make the disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world."

The satellite pictures show that there is an absolute change in the pollution levels in various cities around the world. Beijing's air is clean, now there is no traffic; Venice has its canals clear enough to see the fish swimming. I wonder how the teenager environmental activist, Greta Thunberg, feels nowadays.

Many have become unemployed. With the food outlet closures, the homeless and the vulnerable face critical dearth of food. Many students are stuck at home with no access to lesson materials. The students who are scheduled to graduate this year are left wondering what would happen. Some prison inmates have been sent to home confinement, to prevent the breakout of the COVID-19.

Also Coronavirus is exposing both the evil and the good hidden inside the human hearts. We see what people are made of, when they feel threatened and afraid. The panic buying, grandstanding of invincibility, disregarding others' welfare, etc., bring out the evil, while serving and treating the

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vulnerable at the risk of their own welfare bring out the good.

We should remember the EMT, hospital workers, police and military personnel; and appreciate their duty-bound faithfulness, and pray for their safety.

What certain Christians do not understand is the difference between believing God and testing God. This is no time to insist upon holding worship services attended by large gatherings in the church. The purpose of social distancing is to avoid high density of population in a confined place.

Sacramento Bee reported, without naming those churches, that one-third of the more than 300 confirmed cases of infection took place in the places of worship. So-called, "Bible-believing" Christians should realize that the Bible is full of caution against the "unclean." The ancient believers did not know anything about germs, but they knew that by touching, people became unclean. That is the reason why the ancient believers practiced the ritual cleanliness, or "the ritual distancing," as part of their religious observation.

Just because you believed in 'something,' that does not make you right about what you believe. Believing that God will exempt you and treat you with partiality just because you believed in God, is not faith, but is, indeed, testing God. No one can claim that one's faith is perfect without any error. There is always a chance that one

believes wrongly, inadequately, or selfishly; the act of believing itself is not the same thing as obeying God's will.

Faith in God means obeying and understanding God's will. Jesus taught:

⁵⁰ For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother Mt. 12:48)."

Also he stressed:

²³ But as for what was sown on good soil, this is the one who hears the word and understands it (Mt. 13:23a)

Jesus must have said this for a good reason:

¹⁶ "See, I am sending you out like sheep into the midst of wolves; so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves (Mt. 10:16).

It is time believers must use their heads! Being faithful is understanding God's Word and practicing it.

Then again, reality is not so clear-cut and black and white. What about the regular workers who provide labor in those businesses and industries that are deemed essential, who are often working without adequate protective gear and must interact with many customers? Aren't they the ones who are the most vulnerable of all? What about the single-parents who must go to work, who have young children? Who is going to babysit them, while the parents are

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called away? Aren't they the childcare center workers? If you are stuck at home with many young children, or someone to take care of, maybe you are one of those unsung heroes.

Here, the evil and the good mingle along the blurred line: those who must use public transportation, such as subway, it is almost impossible to keep the social distancing in the crowded subway. We need the essential services, but those who provide such services are exposed to the risk of infection, while those who choose to shelter in place depend on their services. The Coronavirus is pitting our needs for the essential services with the safety of those who meet our needs!

This Coronavirus crisis affirms what Jesus said:

¹⁷ In the same way, every good tree bears good fruit, but the bad tree bears bad fruit.

¹⁸ A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a bad tree bear good fruit.

And the truth Jesus held about people is this:

²⁰ Thus you will know them by their fruits.

People cannot help revealing themselves by their own fruit—that is, what they achieve through the choice of their action.

So when we see evil, it is not all that clear-cut. But we can distinguish at least two different people who are faced with evil: 1)

there are people who are active participants in spreading evil, and 2) there are others who are the victims of evil circumstances.

Those who defy safety concerns in their ignorance, idiocy, or "faith," are the bad actors. Those who must risk their health to provide essential services are the potential victims of circumstances: they deserve our prayer and praise, respect and reverence.