

“Who Is This?”
a sermon by Kyndall Rae Rothaus,
concerning Matthew 21:1-11
for Lake Shore Baptist Church, Waco,
on Palm Sunday, April 9, 2017

Jesus came riding into Jerusalem, surrounded by a joyous mob all hastily removing their cloaks as well as the branches of trees and laying them on the ground for his donkey walk upon. The procession into Jerusalem caused the whole city to be in turmoil. Everyone who saw the crowds or heard their cries was asking about the donkey-rider, “Who is this?”

“Who is this?” continues to be one of the most fundamental questions of our Christian faith. “Who is Jesus?” Are we any closer to an answer than they were back then? In our city, our nation, the church universal . . . we still find turmoil about this mystery of a person, of a God, the human being we call Jesus. Some call him teacher; others call him prophet. Some say, Son of God, some say healer, some call him God’s sacrifice—the atonement for our sins. Some say, pure compassion; some say righteous judge. Some say meek and mild; some say, all hail the power of Jesus’ name. If I asked *you*, “Who is Jesus,” what would you say? If I asked all of you, would I get as many answers as there are palm branches waving about in this room?

Imagine that I *don’t* ask you. Instead we’re all sitting here quietly and reverently, no questions asked, worshipping God as best we know how when suddenly we hear shouting outside—loud shouting, and lots of it. Bewildered and alarmed, some of us run to the windows and doors to take a peek, while others of us shift nervously in our chairs. Parading down the street is a great mob of people shouting, “Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest heaven!”

I would feel very suspicious of that mob, wouldn’t you? Now imagine that in the middle of the throng coming down Bishop Drive in Waco, Texas there is this sort of homeless-looking person riding on a donkey that smelled exactly like a donkey, and people are taking off their North Face and Patagonia jackets and laying them on the ground as if to make a red carpet, only the humble little donkey doesn’t know the difference between a carpet and a toilet, but no one seems to care about that. They just keep shouting and dancing and hoping to touch this person, as if he were on his way to a concert stage rather than a cross. If I saw all that on Bishop Drive, to say I’d be weirded out is stating it mildly.

It’s really not hard to understand why Jerusalem was in turmoil as the Gospel writer tells us. This wasn’t your ordinary town event. And Jesus, who never was any good at improving his reputation, only makes things far worse by what he does next.

Let me read it to you: *When he entered Jerusalem, the whole city was in turmoil, asking, “Who is this?” The crowds were saying, “This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee.” Then Jesus entered the temple and drove out all who were selling and buying in the temple, and he overturned the tables of the money changers and the seats of those who sold doves. He said to them, “It is written, ‘My house shall be called a house of prayer’; but you are making it a den of*

robbers.” The blind and the lame came to him in the temple, and he cured them. But when the chief priests and the scribes saw the amazing things that he did, and heard the children crying out in the temple, “Hosanna to the Son of David,” they became angry and said to him, “Do you hear what these are saying?”

As you can imagine, the stunt in the temple didn't help his case at all, and the question only got more intense. *Who is this?* As in, who the heck does this guy think he is? To make matters even more complicated, the next morning Jesus got irritated and cursed a fig tree of all things, which makes no sense at all, if you ask me. No wonder people were confused. Who is this? What is he doing? Why is he here? What are we to do with him?

What do you think about those questions? It is easy in hindsight to be a part of the crowd that celebrates Jesus' arrival and hails him with palms, as we have done here today. It is easy to claim our place in a story we already know. It is harder to find our place in the story that is emerging, harder to recognize Jesus in our present midst and take him seriously as the Word of God. Hindsight may be 20/20, but Jesus is alive today, and it's very hard to keep our vision clear in the here and now.

It is far easier to show up on Palm Sunday and sing Hosannas than it is to show up on Good Friday and join the mourning, just as it is easier to sing to God on Sunday than to sit with God among those who suffer on a Tuesday. If we only look for God in the celebrations and certainties, but do not look for God in the questions, what will we miss? It is more pleasant to find God among the happy faces than to find God in the anger of a prophet who overturns our tables and reveals our not-so-secret love of money. But pleasant isn't the same thing as true.

Who is this Jesus? Humble leader, rabble-rouser, healer, mystery? He came parading or crashing into Jerusalem, interrupting normal, causing confusion, creating a commotion, upending order and stirring up a ruckus. Imagine if this happened here today. In what ways might we be startled? In what ways might we be overjoyed? Suspicious? Bewildered? Nervous?

What would Jesus overturn in here, among us? Would he overturn our preconceptions about one another or our assumptions about our neighbors or our opinions about who he was? Would he overturn our priorities? Would he overturn our grudges? Our privilege? Our reluctance to know joy? Our bitterness? Our fear?

While Easter is the most joyous day of the Christian year, Holy Week is the toughest. It asks a lot of us. Holy Week challenges us to follow Jesus through the dark and difficult stuff; otherwise Easter Sunday has no more substantive meaning for our faith than the Easter bunny. Holy Week challenges us not to jump straight from waving palm branches to singing alleluias, as if rejoicing was all there is to this Christian life, as if we could exist from Sunday to smiling Sunday and suppress all the junk that happens in a week. Holy Week challenges us to be real, to be human, to be honest about suffering and loss and fear and death and darkness and grief. Holy Week invites us into an intimacy with the story that we're not too sure we want, an intimacy we might not even know we need. Holy Week invites us to acknowledge our confusion and turmoil and to ask our questions and to allow our certainties to be upended. Holy Week invites us to ask, “Who is

Jesus?” and every year is the chance to learn a new answer. Here is a prayer I wrote to see us through the journey:

Turn over my tables, Lord Jesus.
I invite you to make a holy ruckus inside of me.
I invite you to clear me of false idols
and false security. I invite
your soul-stirring chaos into my life.
I am scared to ask this, of course,
and I will try not to be irritated when you answer
these reckless prayers of mine
for I understand that the way I’ve ran this temple—
this body of mine—
is not always pleasing to you.
Sometimes I am on the wrong track,
do not even realize how I have strayed.
Help me to listen to your voice,
even when you say things I do not like to hear.
Overturn my tables, Lord Jesus. Un-clutter my life
that I might discover the real treasures
you have for me. Overturn my tables!
Rid me of what I do not need
and that which no longer serves me.
Help me to honor this body
of mine as the temple it is.
Sometimes I’m so busy
adorning this body,
neglecting this body,
feeling ashamed of this body,
pushing, punishing this body,
I forget it is a gift.
If I didn’t have this temple of a body
there would not be a way for me
to exist in this world, no home
for my soul to inhabit.
Thank you, O Christ, for your body,
which was broken for me.
Thank you for inhabiting a human body
with human smells and human ailments
and human limits. Thank you
for riding down the streets
on that ridiculous donkey
accompanied by ridiculous people.
It helps me know
you don’t so much mind ridiculous me.
In fact, you rather adore her,

you see the Creator's artistic flare, appreciate
the design and the way the so-called
flaws round out the masterpiece.

Thank you for bodies—yours, mine.

Overturn my tables, Lord Jesus
for I have yet to see as you see
to know me the way you know me,
to love this world the way you love.

Overturn my tables.

I need to see and hear and feel
my misconceptions and delusions and grudges
come crashing to the ground
so that something new and joyous
can emerge from their ruins.

Am I really ready for this? The overhaul,
the makeover your arrival brings?

Probably not.

I'm probably too scared,
too much of a pansy.

Lord, in your mercy,
come anyway.

Don't wait for me to be brave enough.

Just show up. Give me the strength I need
step by step. I should warn you:

I will probably resist transformation,
even when it's brought to me by Jesus.

I do not like change; I can be stubborn.

They say you are used to resistance,
so perhaps I'm not anything you can't handle.

Be gentle with me sometimes, will you?

I can be sensitive and fragile.

I get riled up so easy.

I need help if I'm to have you
turning me over like this.

I enter Holy Week feeble and frail
asking most humbly that you would enter me.

On your way to your death,
carry me into your suffering
and into the suffering of those you love.

Carry my frightened feeble self with you.

Don't leave me on the road beside these trampled palms.

Take me on your bumpy, dangerous ride,
and teach me at last how to live. Amen.