

There's Something About Jesus

In God We Trust

March 15, 2020

Good morning everyone.

And good morning to everyone watching online right now.

Today, as Shannon said, we're beginning a brand new series called *There's Something About Jesus*.

And just so you'll know, last week, when this COVID-19 situation started to become much more of a concern than it had been, I thought "I probably need to push this back a week and just talk about coronavirus because that's what's on everyone's mind."

But then, as I looked at the notes I had written out over a month ago for this first message, I

realized it actually has a great application to this current situation. So, I decided that I'm just going to stick to the original plan ...

... which is to talk about Jesus for the next five weeks.

Obviously, that's always an appropriate subject because, without Him – who He was and what He did – we wouldn't even be here (or watching online) in the first place.

And it's even more appropriate now as we're in the season of Lent and coming up on Holy Week – remembering the events of Good Friday and Easter Sunday – which is, obviously, about Jesus.

But the most important reason I wanted to do this series is because Jesus so often becomes a topic of conversation *culturally*, especially as we approach Easter and, especially in an

election year.

In an election year, many people – Christian and non – often use Jesus as something of a poster child for whatever social cause or political position they personally embrace.

“And *furthermore*,” we say, “*this* is what Jesus taught ... *this* is what Jesus did ... *this* is how Jesus wants us to live.”

He’s kind of like the “cherry on top” of whatever case we might be trying to make.

That’s why, if you pay attention, at some point over the next few months, you’ll almost certainly encounter ...

- The *liberal* Jesus
- The *family-values* Jesus
- The *socialist* Jesus
- The *butt-kicking* Jesus

- The *feminist* Jesus
- The *pro-life* Jesus
- The *meekest-and-mild non-judgmental* Jesus

... and the list could go on and on.

In addition, many of us who are Christians – and I realize that some who attend or watch online are *not* Christians; we're glad to have you; we actually started this church for you ...

Many of us who are Christians have become so familiar with the basic outline of Jesus' life –

- Second person of the Trinity
- Born of a virgin
- Did some miracles
- Taught some stuff
- Died on the cross
- Rose from the dead

- Returned to heaven in bodily form (somehow)

We've become so familiar with the basic *outline* of Jesus that Jesus *Himself* becomes kind of an appendage to our faith – to what we believe and what we do – instead of the center.

“Oh, I believe in God,” we say. “And Jesus? Well, He kind of fits in there somewhere.”

So, what I want to do in the next five weeks – whether we're able to meet here on campus or, more likely, we have to do our services completely via livestream ...

What I want to do is to look at five unique qualities of Jesus *and His story* that most of us overlook; qualities that not only help us better understand the nature of our God but also have life-changing implications.

In other words, if you can grab on to what we're going to talk about from now through Easter Sunday, it will change your life.

- If you're a Christian, your faith will be deeper and more relevant to your everyday experience.
- And if you're *not* a Christian – if you're *not* a believer in and *not* a follower of Jesus – you might just want to become one.

So, let's begin with the first unique and often overlooked aspect of what it meant for Jesus to be ... well, *Jesus* ... a quality which, as I said, actually has a pretty strong application to the crisis we're facing right now with Covid-19.

And to understand what that is, we're going

to take a look at what happens to Jesus – or more accurately, what Jesus *does*, because this is actually a very *proactive* quality ...

... we're going to look at what Jesus *does* on "Palm Sunday," five days before his crucifixion on the following Friday.

So, here we go.

Triumphal Entry

After three and a half years of a "traveling ministry" throughout the land of Palestine, Jesus had gained an incredible following among the common people.

Thousands and thousands of them had seen his miracles and heard his teaching and had come to believe that he was the long-awaited Messiah who would finally, at last, usher in the Kingdom of God, free Israel from captivity

and restore it to its former glory.

And what's ironic about that is that Jesus himself had done nothing to encourage that conclusion.

In fact, on the occasions when he had been questioned about his identity, he rarely gave a direct answer. And whenever he did a miracle for someone, he almost always said "keep this to yourself. Don't go make a big deal out of it" – a request that no one honored. They *always* told everyone else!

It was almost like Jesus was trying to downplay what people were saying about him.

But, on this particular day, that all came to an end. On this day, as Jesus entered Jerusalem, he intentionally did something that blatantly signaled to everyone watching that, yes, he

was indeed the Messiah.

And he did it in one of the most public and visible settings possible in that culture.

Josephus, the ancient Jewish historian, tells us that, at this particular time of the year, the population of Jerusalem would swell from 30,000 to 200,000 as Jewish pilgrims from all over the Roman Empire came to celebrate the annual Passover festival.

Furthermore, Josephus also writes that just days before Jesus' arrival, *Pontius Pilate*, the Roman Governor of the province had moved his headquarters from Caesarea to Jerusalem, marching into the city with great fanfare – troops and banners and extra soldiers because of the crowds.

And just before *he* arrived, King Herod (a puppet king who had been appointed by the

Romans) had relocated *his* headquarters from Tiberius. And he also entered Jerusalem with great fanfare with *his* banners and *his* troops.

So, as Jesus and his disciples entered Jerusalem that Sunday, not only was it jam-packed, everybody who was anybody in that region was there ... which is where we pick up the story.

John's gospel tells us that ...

The great crowd that had come for the Feast heard that Jesus was on his way to Jerusalem. They took palm branches and went out to meet him ...

*... shouting, "Hosanna!"
"Blessed is he who comes in
the name of the Lord!"*

"Blessed is the King of Israel!"
John 12:12-13 (NIV)

... which is more than just a little bit of a slap in the face of the Romans because *Herod* – not Jesus – is the King of Israel.

In fact, the whole "palm branch thing" was *also* a slap in the face because palm branches had nothing to do with celebrating Passover.

Instead, the "palm branch thing" was a callback to something that had happened two centuries earlier when a great Jewish leader by the name of Judas Maccabeus and his followers liberated Jerusalem from domination by the *Greeks*. As he and his army marched through their newly freed city, the people waved palm branches and threw them at the soldier's feet.

And by doing the same thing as Jesus entered Jerusalem, the people were declaring their hope that he would liberate them from Rome.ⁱ

It was such a hyped-up moment that Matthew's gospel sums it up like this:

When Jesus entered Jerusalem, the whole city was stirred. Matthew 21:10 (NIV)

Everywhere you went, everybody was talking about the grand entry that Jesus was making.

It was so over-the-top and seditious that John tells us that ...

The panicked religious leaders said to one another:

"Look how the whole world has gone after him!" John 12:19 (NIV)

Luke and Mark paint a similar picture in their Gospels: thousands upon thousands of jubilant men and women, all singing the praises of Jesus, all expecting something really big to happen.

Of course, from the vantage point of history, you and I know that something big *does* happen.

But it's not what everyone expects. Instead of *overthrowing* the Romans, Jesus – like so many other wannabe messiahs before him – is *overthrown* by them when He's executed on a cross five days later.

A Real Man

Now, the reason I'm telling you this story is because I want us to look inside the heart and mind of Jesus at this point and discover something about Him that, I think, will change

the way we see Him and maybe even the way we deal with situations like the one we're all facing right now.

Of course, a question that probably has to be considered before we can do that is "why should we believe that Jesus was thinking or feeling anything at all?"

I say that because Christians have a little bit of a problem whenever we look back at the story of his life.

The problem is that ...

- We believe that Jesus was God in human form.
- And we believe that God's plan was being carried out in everything He did – including this event of Palm Sunday.

So, when we read this story, we unconsciously filter it through those lenses.

“If Jesus was God,” we think, “it must mean that he already knew the end from the beginning. Because of his divine foreknowledge and supernatural insight, He already knew as he made his way to Jerusalem that a multitude would be waiting. He already knew they would throw their coats down before him and wave palm branches.”

“The whole thing was already predetermined and all he needed to do was to play his part. Just follow the script and get to the end of it, which, of course, was easy to do because, *after all, he was God.*”

By the way, this perception of Jesus is quite common. In fact, it's ruled Christianity for the last 19 centuries or so.

It's a carryover from the earliest days of the faith when it was essential to make it crystal clear that Jesus was not just an ordinary man – he was also God in the flesh.

That's why in much of the medieval artwork depicting his life, Jesus almost always has a halo. (picture)

It was an attempt to emphasize the divinity of Jesus because it was so unique that what appeared as a man was somehow the God of Israel – the God of all creation.

Unfortunately, emphasizing the *divinity* of Jesus has resulted in the undesirable consequence of *de-emphasizing* the *humanity* of Jesus, leaving us with an individual who is – at best – static, flat and emotionless – a Jesus who, as N.T. Wright puts it ...

“... wanders around with a faraway look ...

remembering the time when he was sitting up in heaven with the other members of Trinity having angels bring him bananas on golden dishes.”

At worst it leaves us with a Jesus who is a special brand of human never before and never again seen:

- A magic man.
- A divine/human machine – an automaton, if you will.
- A human body possessed not by demons, but by the power of the divine mind.

Playing down the humanity of Jesus turns him into an alien humanoid with whom none of us can truly identify.

He becomes a hybrid creation with an unfair advantage over us in every way; a Casper-

the-Friendly-Ghost kind of being who is – when you take it to its logical conclusion – *totally irrelevant* to the everyday life that you and I live.

- He is irrelevant because there is no way we can ever live like he did
- Irrelevant because there was no possibility of him ever making a mistake
- Irrelevant because “the fix was in”
- Irrelevant because those things are just not true for you and me.

Of course, that’s not the only problem with downplaying Jesus’ humanity. It’s also not *Christian*.

Those who first followed Jesus and recorded his story for us again and again emphasized

that Jesus was a real man – with all the emotions and concerns and even the temptations of real humans like you and like me.

And there are more passages of scripture than we have time to look at this morning, but I want to show you just one that I think spells it out most clearly. It's from the New Testament book of Hebrews, second chapter.

Speaking of Jesus, it says ...

*Jesus and the ones he makes
holy have the same Father.
That is why Jesus is not
ashamed to call them his
brothers and sisters.
Hebrews 2:11 (NLT)*

Now, think about that for a minute.

People in a family come from the same gene pool, the same DNA. There might be

variations of personality or hair color or size, but there's no doubt that you and your siblings, if you have any, are made of the same "stuff."

That's not to say that they won't ever act like alien humanoids on occasion but, really, they are not. They are just like you.

And this verse means the same thing. Jesus, in his days on this earth, was just like you and just like me. If you're a man, he was once a boy just like you.

The writer of Hebrews goes on to say ...

Because God's children are human beings—made of flesh and blood—Jesus also became flesh and blood by being born in human form.

And here's why he did that:

For only as a human being could he die, and only by dying could he break the power of the Devil, who had the power of death.

Only in this way could he set free all who have lived their lives as slaves to the fear of dying. Hebrews 2:14-15 (NLT)

In other words, unless Jesus was really and truly 100% human, his death couldn't be real.

And if his death wasn't real, then his victory over death and Satan couldn't be real either.

And if his victory over death and Satan wasn't real, then you and I have every reason to be very, very afraid of ...

- The coronavirus

- Or having an accident on the way home
- Or choking on a piece of barbeque at lunch today
- Or a thousand other things that could take our lives.

But the writer goes on to say ...

Therefore ...

Meaning "because God's plan is for us not to fear death."

Therefore ...

Meaning "because God's plan is for us not to be defeated by Satan ..."

Therefore, it was necessary for him [Jesus] to be made in every respect like us, his brothers and sisters, so that he could be our merciful and faithful High Priest before

God.

Then he could offer a sacrifice that would take away the sins of the people. Hebrews 2:17 (NLT)

I think that wording is so important.

For the death of Jesus to “count” on our behalf in the way God had planned it – for his death to atone for sin, even though He was God, had to be made like us in every respect.

There could be ...

- No unfair advantages.
- No fixes.
- No special privileges.
- No autopilot.
- No going through the motions.
- No pretend temptations to which he

couldn't fall because, after all, he was God and God, by our definition, must be sinless.

- No emotional or physical suffering that didn't really hurt, sometimes to the point where he thought about throwing in the towel just like you and I think about it.

If Jesus wasn't truly human – 100% to the core – then he is of no help to you and me in this life or in the next. He is completely irrelevant, and we should stop talking about him.

And, I wonder if the writer of Hebrews had this same thought in mind when he wrote because ...

He concluded his discussion of Jesus' humanity with these words:

Since he himself has gone through suffering and testing

...

And that suffering was real. The temptations and possibility of failure were real. All of it was real and really experienced just like a real human being would really experience it.

Since he himself has gone through suffering and testing

...

... he is able to help us when we are being tested.

Hebrews 2:18 (NLT)

And, therefore, Jesus, is astoundingly relevant to every man, woman and child who has ever lived. What he said and what he did is relevant to you and relevant to me.

Because He was just like us.

Jesus was God with all the limitations of being a human. God, in Jesus, took on all of the limits

and constraints we have.

The Ride of Faith

Now, I've spent so much time on this "humanity of Jesus" issue – this issue of his solidarity with you and me – because it is critically important in understanding what actually took place on that first Palm Sunday.

Remember, Jesus is entering Jerusalem and there's a huge mob of people proclaiming him as Messiah and King. And Jesus, in a departure from his previous reactions to these kinds of demonstrations, is not denying it.

In fact, as I said earlier, this time he does something so radical that his confirmation of their proclamation is unmistakable, though he doesn't say a single word to the crowd.

So, what did He do?

Actually, I'm a little bit hesitant to tell you now because, after all this build-up, it's probably not going to sound like that big of a deal. But it really was incredibly significant and obvious to everyone who saw it.

Rewind to just a few hours before the entry into Jerusalem. Mark (as well as Matthew and Luke) tells us that ...

As Jesus and his disciples approached Jerusalem, they came to the towns of Bethphage and Bethany, on the Mount of Olives. Jesus sent two of them on ahead.

"Go into that village over there," he told them, "and as soon as you enter it, you will see a colt tied there that has

never been ridden. Untie it and bring it here.

If anyone asks what you are doing, just say, `The Lord needs it and will return it soon.'"

The two disciples left and found the colt standing in the street, tied outside a house.

And, as they untied it, they were questioned, just as Jesus had expected.

And they gave the answer he prescribed, and the owners gave them the colt.

Then they brought the colt to Jesus and threw their garments over it, and he sat on it. Mark 11:1-7 (NLT)

And, so, when he entered the city of Jerusalem, Jesus wasn't walking. He was riding on the colt of a donkey.

And that, friends, was huge! It was a radical move that spoke volumes, far beyond what any words could have communicated.

Why?

Because, in Jesus' day, with "messianic expectations" running sky high, with the prolonged captivity to the Romans, everyone was very aware of the scriptural promises of God to send an anointed Deliverer.

And one of those promises was from the Old Testament prophet Zechariah, who had written:

Rejoice greatly, O people of Zion! Shout in triumph, O people of Jerusalem!

Look, your king is coming to you. He is righteous and victorious, yet he is humble, riding on a donkey—even on a donkey's colt.

Zechariah 9:9 (NLT)

And, so, when Jesus rode into Jerusalem on that day, he knew exactly how it would be received.

He knew exactly what people would think and exactly what they would do.

He knew they would shout, "Hosanna!" (which means "God save us") and "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!"

And he knew all of that not because He was God and his special God-powers told him what would happen.

Remember, Jesus was God with all the

limitations of being a human.

Remember, God, in Jesus, took on all of the limits and constraints we have.

Jesus knew what would happen simply because he knew the Hebrew Bible.

He knew what Zechariah had written!

Which means ... and this is super-important ...

Jesus *deliberately chose* to enter Jerusalem in this manner.

In fact, he set the whole thing up in advance, including the colt!

The reason he knew it was there and waiting for him wasn't because He could supernaturally "see it."

He knew it was there because he had pre-arranged with some friends in Bethany (probably Mary, Martha and Lazarus) to have it ready and to release it to whoever gave the secret passphrase: "the Lord has need of it."

Now, here's why all of this is so important and what I really want you to see in this.

For Jesus to enter Jerusalem on a colt surrounded by throngs of admirers meant passing the point of no return.

And Jesus knew it.

He knew there was no turning back after this day because this was an undeniable challenge to both to the Temple leadership and to the Romans – in fact, to Caesar himself.

And Jesus knew those two groups – who despised each other – would conspire to put Him to death as quickly as possible, which they did.

When Jesus rode into Jerusalem that day, he was making an absolute and total commitment to be the Messiah of God, the Savior – not just of Israel – but of the whole world.

Now, again, if Jesus is the automaton “God-man” – the irrelevant divine-humanoid – then that’s no big deal at all.

It’s what the script calls for and he knows that at the end, after his death on the cross, he’ll be raised again and get to go back to heaven. No big deal. Just suck it up and play the part while dreaming of those bananas.

A god's gotta do what a god's gotta do.

But ...

- If Jesus is a real human being like you and me ...
- If Jesus is God with all the limitations of being a human.
- If God, in Jesus, took on all of the limits and constraints we have.

Then deliberately setting this whole thing up and following through with it is the greatest act of faith in his entire life!

Now, we typically don't think of Jesus like that, do we? We don't think of Jesus as having to have faith just like we do.

We don't think of Jesus entering into a life-

and-death situation with the same kinds of knots in the stomach, the same kinds of internal emotions and concerns that you and I might have when facing, oh I don't know ...

... a global pandemic in the form of an incurable virus that, if it doesn't kill us or someone close to us or someone we love, is probably going to make things very difficult for a while at least financially.

We don't think of Jesus having to be a person of faith. But he was.

He had to trust that what He was reading in the scriptures about God and the Messiah and all that had been foretold and promised was actually going to happen to *Him*.

Prophetic promises like ...

"You will not abandon me to the grave, nor will you let your

Holy One see decay.”
Psalms 16:10 (NIV)

When Jesus read that, he had to decide: “do I believe this enough to act on it? To actually let them nail me to a cross? That’s an incredible risk to take. If I set this whole thing up and ride this colt into town, it’s a done deal. And my only hope is in that promise.”

Well, as we know, Jesus *did* ride – the ride of faith.

And what this Palm Sunday event is about more than anything else is *the faith of Jesus* to do what His Father had revealed to him, even though it meant his certain death, even though all he had at the time was the promise of the scripture that his death would not be the end.

And that, friends, is encouraging to me

because that's how you and I have to live!

You see, Jesus wasn't some "magic miracle man" who did all the things he did simply because he was God. Not at all.

Jesus did all the things he did because, as a real man, he acted in perfect faith and obedience as humans have been called to do – and failed to do – since the time of Adam.

That's why the writer of Hebrews says to us:

Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith ... Hebrews 12:2 (NIV)

Adam was the failure of faith – Jesus was the perfecter of it. He's the example to follow.

That's why Peter writes:

Christ suffered for you,

leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps.

When they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats.

Instead, he entrusted himself to Him who judges justly. 1 Peter 2:23 (NIV)

That's faith – entrusting yourself to the one who has the final say and doing what He has told you to do in spite of your present circumstances.

Conclusion

... which brings us right back to where we started this message ... our present circumstances.

Many of us walked in here today worried and stressed and concerned about what's happening in our world right now and what might happen to us?

- What will happen to my retirement if the stock market doesn't come back quickly?
- What am I going to do if my kids are out of school for a month?
- What if I get laid off or lose my job?
- What if I run out of toilet paper?

More seriously ...

- Am I going to become infected?
- Is it going to be bad?
- Will I or someone I know and love die from this?
- Will I be the one who "gives it to them?"
- When will things get back to normal, if ever?

Friends, this is a big deal and right smack in the middle of it, you know what God is saying to those of us who are Christians?

Do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with my righteous right hand.” Isaiah 41:10

Do not let your heart be troubled.

The peace I give is a gift the world cannot give. So, don't be troubled or afraid. John 14:27

Do not be anxious about anything but let your prayers and requests be known to God. Philippians 4:6

Don't worry about these things, saying, 'What will we eat? What will we drink? What will we wear?' These things dominate the thoughts of unbelievers, but your heavenly Father already knows all your needs. Seek the Kingdom of God above all else, and live righteously, and he will give you everything you need. Matthew 6:31-33

In all things God works for the good of those who love Him and who are called according to His purpose. Romans 8:28

<BAND GET INTO PLACE – 1 min left>

All of those are encouragements to have faith in God; to trust that He is for us regardless of what it looks like right now.

And what I love about Jesus – what I love

about God – is that these are not pious platitudes and lofty exhortations. They are the exact ideas and promises and principles that God Himself in the person of Jesus of Nazareth lived by ...

... because Jesus was a man of faith just like every human is called to be; just like you and I have to be.

Now, as close out this service, we're going to go back and sing part of a song we sang earlier in this service.

And as we do I want you to think about your current situation (which may be this virus thing or something else completely) and then, in faith, give it to God.

Ok, if you're in the room stand and let's sing. And if you're watching online, you can sing, too.

Worship Reprise – Abundantly More (2)

CLOSING COMMENTS (2)

1. HOPE Fund available
2. Online giving
3. Campaign postponed

Endnotes

¹ From MAJESTY IN TRANSIT, a sermon by REV. LOUIS H. ZBINDEN, JR. April 13, 2003