

The Second Adam, Part 6: Of Palms and Passover

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Countryside Community Church

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Palm Sunday

I. Christ, the King

How did we get to Holy Week already? It seems like we were just celebrating Christmas a month ago! It has been a busy time at Countryside Community Church. Time has flown. As busy as we have been, Jesus's week is about to get a lot busier. The sparks are going to fly!

Judging from hints in the gospels, Jesus has been planning for this week for quite some time. In Luke's 24-chapter gospel, for instance, Jesus has "set his face to go to Jerusalem" already by Chapter 9. Matthew's Gospel tells us what was on Jesus's mind as he anticipated his journey ahead: "From that time on Jesus began to explain to his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things at the hands of the elders, the chief priests and the teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life." (Matthew 16:21) When Peter objects, Jesus rebukes him saying, "Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; you do not have in mind the concerns of God, but merely human concerns." (v. 22)

Of course, for any of Jesus's intentions to come to fruition, he has to get to Jerusalem first – and get there alive. We know already that Herod's minions were on high alert, trying to track him down and arrest him as he made his way around the country, so merely entering Jerusalem with his head connected to his neck was not as easy a task as one might suppose. Evidently, Jesus has made quiet arrangements, sending advance scouts ahead of him to organize whatever followers they could find to form a crowd on Palm Sunday. Those scouts have found someone on the outskirts of Jerusalem with a donkey and given that person a password that his disciples can use to retrieve it at the right time: "The master has need of it."

Why a donkey? A number of reasons. First, King Solomon had ridden to his coronation on the back of a mule that had once belonged to King David (1 Kgs 1:33-34). Second, King Jehu had ridden into Samaria (the capital of the Northern Kingdom) over the garments of his adherents in order to destroy the temple of the false god, Baal (2 Kgs 9:11-10:28) – something we'll see a repeat of with Jesus, only with the Jerusalem Temple which, to Jesus, may as well have been consecrated to Baal. Third, and most importantly, centuries earlier the prophet Zechariah had written, "Behold, your king comes to you, triumphant and victorious. He is humble and riding on an ass, on a colt the foal of an ass." (Zech 9:9) This prediction was interpreted by the Jews as a sign of the Messiah who

would one day come, be crowned king, and lead Israel in a revolution that would unite heaven and earth.

In other words, Jesus was making his bid for kingship when he entered Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. Not just any kind of kingship, but *Messiahship*. Judging by what Jesus has already told his disciples, he's not expecting his bid for the position to go well.

And why would it? Can you imagine what would happen if Jesus made an appearance in our day, inviting us to crown him king of the United States? Certainly he would find a lot of sympathizers initially, just as he did 2,000 years ago. Many of us would likely find ourselves on the outskirts of Washington, DC, ready to welcome Jesus with what in all likelihood would be the largest crowd ever to march on Washington. But I wonder how many of his enthusiasts – Republican, Democrat, Tea Party, or Socialist – would remain when Jesus announced his platform for making America great?

Here's Jesus's plan for dealing with America's enemies: "Love your enemy, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also, and from anyone who takes away your coat do not withhold even your shirt." (Luke 6:27-29)

Here's Jesus's plan for reforming the banking system: "Give to everyone who begs from you; and if anyone takes away your goods, do not ask for them again." (Luke 6:30) "If you lend to those from whom you hope to receive, what credit is that to you? Even sinners lend to sinners, to receive as much again." (Luke 6:34)

And how would Jesus propose to deal with our opposition, politically or otherwise? "Do to others as you would have them do to you. If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them. If you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners do the same." (Luke 6:31-33) "But love your enemies, do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return. Your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High; for he is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked." (Luke 6:35)

No, we can always hope that Jesus will return and make his bid to lead us. But is there any part of our political or economic system that remotely resembles the kind of platform he would seek to establish? If you think things are chaotic now, just imagine how chaotic they would become with Jesus in the White House striving to implement his policies! Those of us gathered to greet him on the outskirts of DC might lay down our cloaks and palms before him and shout, "Hosanna!" But it is doubtful that many of us would still be shouting these things by the end of a single week.

II. Christ, the High Priest

Of course, those of us who put less faith in the government than in the community of faith might be willing to stick with Jesus as he turned the political and economic system on its head, in the hopes that the religious community who affirmed his leadership would finally have a voice. Yet if Jesus were to turn his attention to the faithful themselves, I wonder how many of us would remain so enthusiastic.

The first thing Jesus does after entering Jerusalem is head straight to the Temple and upend the tables of the money-changers, crying, "It is written, 'My house shall be called a house of prayer'; but you are making it a den of robbers!" (Matthew 21:13) In doing so, Jesus is not simply making a statement about how the religious establishment's yearning for financial gain has replaced the yearning for God. Jesus is seeking to take over the Temple itself. Jesus is making his bid for the position of High Priest as well as a bid for kingship – for the Messiah is not just a political and economic leader but a faith leader as well.

If Jesus entered Washington, DC, today and made his bid to be the leader of the Christian Church, I can imagine that many of us would shout, "Hallelujah! It's about time! The Church has become corrupt and needs to be upended." And in the matter of the Church's use of money, all but the televangelists would probably be right there with him.

But what if Jesus turned his attention from how televangelists use money to how everyday Christians use their money? How long do you suppose we'd be supporting Jesus then? Here's just one example of Jesus's economic platform for the faithful from the Gospel of Mark:

"A man ran up and knelt before Jesus, and asked him, 'Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?' Jesus said to him, 'Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone. You know the commandments: You shall not murder; You shall not commit adultery; You shall not steal; You shall not bear false witness; You shall not defraud; Honor your father and mother.' He said to him, 'Teacher, I have kept all these since my youth.' Jesus, looking at him, loved him and said, 'You lack one thing; go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.' When he heard this, he was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions." (Mark 10:17-22)

That young man probably didn't have a tenth of the possessions that most of us have. A lot of our basements probably would have seemed like the Taj Mahal to him. Do you really suppose many of us would be shouting "Hosanna!" by the end of the week if Jesus returned and invited us into greater discipleship like he did with the young man?

It's not that Jesus taught that everyone should give away all their possessions. But Jesus had a way of looking into the hearts of people, discerning that which they held closer to their hearts than God, and asked them to let go of just those things. I suspect that money would be one of those things that Jesus would find that most of us are holding too closely. After all, most Christians don't tithe, even though a tithe (giving back just ten percent of one's net income to God) is the baseline for biblical faithfulness. And in America, giving away ten percent would still leave the vast majority of us many times richer than two-thirds of the world. But if talking about money makes you uncomfortable, we could always find other things Jesus might ask a potential follower to let go of ...

Imagine, for instance, if Jesus told us to let go of football because devotion to the game is greater than many people's devotion to God in our country and it is causing too many irreparable head injuries among America's youth to be acceptable in God's sight?

Oh, so the money thing isn't so bad after all ... ?

The point is, Jesus can always find an idol among idol worshippers – and we are all idolaters on one level or another. Jesus doesn't think much of idols. Rumor has it, neither does God. An idol is anything we love more than God; anything we'll follow with greater devotion and intentionality than God.

A progressive Christian minister once confided that, in his view, the majority of his "progressive" congregation weren't actually "progressive" in any way Jesus was progressive, but are actually idol-worshippers in disguise. Many in his congregation lambasted conservative churches, with their penchant for excluding others who aren't like them and their love of rule-making. Yet, my minister friend said, as much as his congregation praised itself for its inclusivity and freedom from rules, he found that for much of his congregation, embracing "progressive" values was all about freedom from rules and not much else. His people weren't more apt to act compassionately toward the less fortunate, or to love their enemy. Instead, "progressivism" was synonymous with letting people do whatever the heck they want without anyone getting in their way – including God. My friend doubted that Jesus would find such a "progressive" religious system any better than a conservative/fundamentalist one. Both would be seen as idolatrous.

So if Jesus returned today, how many Jesus-followers would still be waving palms by the end of the week?

III. Christ, Our Passover

Jesus seems to have known what we would do long before he ever entered Jerusalem. He knew that the more things change, the more they remain the same. For us human beings, it all started back at the Garden and we are little different than our primordial ancestors. We human beings can be set down right

in the middle of God's Paradise, given an All Access pass to everything in the Garden but one thing, and guess what we set our hearts on?

Every single one of us has a Tree, and fruit upon that Tree that represents something we want even more than we want to obey the One who has given all things to us but that one thing. Our desire for that one thing puts us fundamentally at odds with God's Realm. And it makes it fundamentally impossible for us to crown Jesus king or make him the head even of his Church.

If Jesus knew all this before arriving in Jerusalem, one might rightfully ask why he came at all. Was his goal simply to show us how bad we are and make us feel ashamed of ourselves? Ha! Enough of religion already does this without any help at all from Jesus. There would be no need for Jesus if shaming us is what God wanted.

No, when it became clear that we would not accept Jesus as our king or our High Priest, Jesus chose to do something that did not require our permission but only God's call to do so: he became *our Passover*. You remember what Passover is about, right? It's the remembrance of when the Hebrew slaves were told to shed the blood of lamb and paint that blood on their doorposts so that God's Spirit would "pass over" them when seeking the lives of the firstborn of the Egyptian slaveholders.

At the end of the week in Washington, DC – I mean, Jerusalem – on a night of betrayal and desertion, Jesus took the bread of the Passover Seder saying, "This is my body which is broken for you. Do this as often as you eat of it in remembrance of me." And at the end of that Passover Seder, he took the fifth and final cup of wine saying, "This is the cup of the New Covenant in my blood. Do this as often as you drink of it in remembrance of me." When we eat this bread, and drink from this cup, we remember Christ's death, we celebrate Christ's resurrection, and we accept something from Jesus that makes even the angels tremble to behold: ***We accept God's forgiveness for our idolatry, and the passing-over of God's wrath which we expect to receive as recompense for our sins.***

Jesus, the slaughtered Lamb on the Good Friday Cross shows the world in no uncertain terms who we are: we are idolaters. We pick the wrong fruit in the Garden and reject the right Messiah in Jerusalem, all because we do not trust God to have our best interest in mind and thus supplant God's rule with our own. And how's that been working for us ... since *the beginning* until now?

Happily, the Cross not only shows us who we are but who God is: God is the One who chose to "pass over" us even as we were in the process of shedding the blood of the Messiah who God had sent to us. In other words, God chose Grace over judgment, love over wrath, and the possibility of relationship over the impossibility of perfection.

Can you accept a God who chooses relationship over perfection? If you do, I'll warn you: the chances are high that God will ask you to give in the same manner in which you have received. But if you will accept this relationship, this grace, this forgiveness, then one other thing will be true: Christ will not have done what he did in vain.