

**WHY JESUS DID IT**  
**Matthew 21:1-11**  
**Preached by Dr. Cahill**  
**Babcock Presbyterian Church**  
**Palm Sunday, April 13, 2014**

Take today's Gospel reading of Jesus' triumphant entry into Jerusalem out of context and it comes across as a rather happy event in Jesus' life, makes it no different than a Sunday School lesson for children, telling us how Jesus came into Jerusalem riding on a donkey while people threw their coats on the ground and waved palm branches welcoming Jesus as their king. But hopefully as we grow in our faith we want to know more about what happened before and after Palm Sunday to have a deeper appreciation for what happened two thousand years ago.

To help this story inform us let's try to enter into the mind of Jesus so we can better appreciate his thinking that led him to the cross.

If you were here last Sunday, you heard about Jesus raising Lazarus from the tomb, which unleashed a wild chain of events.

Jesus got word that his good friend Lazarus was very ill. It was expected that Jesus would drop everything and run to Lazarus' sick bed to save him before he got worse. Instead, to everybody's surprise, Jesus lingered. He just sat around and waited until he received the news Lazarus died, so don't bother coming.

It's the Jewish custom to bury the dead the next day, so Jesus didn't even try to make the funeral, which must have vexed Lazarus' surviving sisters Mary and Martha all the more. Instead, Jesus took his time and didn't show up for another four days when Lazarus' body was sure to be rotting in his grave.

When he finally got there both sisters told Jesus they expected him to come right away. "Where were you Jesus, why didn't you come when we needed you? Now it's too late."

Of course we know why. It was Jesus' plan from the start to perform his greatest miracle by raising up Lazarus back to life. So surrounded by weeping mourners Jesus made his way to the hillside and ordered the stone sealing the tomb to be rolled away. It was then that Jesus lost control and he started crying, causing the other mourners to comment on Jesus' love for Lazarus and maybe even wonder if he was crying because he came too late to save his friend's life.

But I'll ask again, why would Jesus weep when he knew that in just a few minutes Lazarus would step out of the tomb and into his sister's arms?

There is a reason, Jesus knew the minute Lazarus stepped out of his tomb, he would be taking one step closer to his crucifixion because when word got out fast that Jesus raised a dead man back to life Jesus' enemies would over react. Keep in mind, Bethany, the village Lazarus lived in, was just a stones throw from Jerusalem, the home of the Temple Priests who were growing increasingly nervous about this so called prophet from Galilee who was cruelly raising the hopes of the uneducated and gullible people out in the hinterlands who were swallowing Jesus' horse and pony show hook line and sinker.

Why was the religious establishment so afraid? The priests were afraid if Jesus proclaimed himself to be the King of Israel they'd lose their temple and all Jerusalem would be razed with it by the Romans who'd never tolerate someone like Jesus threaten their hold on Israel. So the Temple Priests, along with the Pharisees and the Herodians, went into damage control mode and conspired together to get rid of Jesus.

Now let's compare and contrast Jesus' motives for being crucified against the motives of the religious establishment who crucified him. Jesus was out to risk himself while on the other hand, the priests and Pharisees were out to save themselves. Remember what Jesus said, "If you try to save your life, you will lose it, but if you give up your life for my sake, I will save it."

For most of us we interpret this to mean if we give up doing those sinful things we do, our bad and self-destructive habits, then God will save us. Certainly it's important for all of us to give up anything that keeps us from giving ourselves over to God, but God actually wants more from us than that.

What more can God want? He wants us to give up our security, he wants us to give up control, he wants us to give up ego gratification.

We always begin Lent with the story of Jesus' facing temptation in the wilderness.

Satan said, "Turn these stones into bread," in other words make your security your number one priority. You know where that can lead, putting yourself first even at the expense of others. Makes for a world of haves and have-not's because we want it all.

Satan then said, "Jump down from the temple to the courtyard below, everybody who sees you being saved by God's angels will fear and obey you, in other words, make a big splash, make yourself the center of attention and satisfy your ego.

Next Satan said, "Bow down and worship me and I'll give you the world. You can be a control freak who really is in control." Really?

Jesus resisted these temptations just before he started his ministry of service and self-sacrifice. Jesus was all about risk taking. Knowing if his mission to planet earth was going to end well, he had to give up everything so he could die well, for our salvation.

That's why Jesus raised up Lazarus from the dead, to get the attention of the Priests and Pharisees to bait them to crucify him. That's why he blatantly marched into Jerusalem on a donkey, the animal of choice for the Kings of the House of David, to get the Herodians' attention. That's also why he turned over the money changers' tables in the temple courtyard and then spent every day for the rest of the week to baiting the religious establishment Priests and Pharisees by preaching and healing in their temple, on their turf.

Jesus willingly risked his security and put himself out there by getting in their face. "Here I am, come and get me," that was his plan all along. Jesus denied himself and took up his cross and followed his father's will to make our salvation possible.

At the same time his adversaries, the priests, scribes and Pharisees either couldn't or wouldn't see that. Unlike Jesus who was all about risking himself, they were all about self-preservation. They gave their lives to remind the Jews of God's Covenant with Abraham, which included the Promised Land but also the promise Abraham would be the Father of a great nation and through his descendants God would bless all the families of the earth.

The Priests and Pharisees saw themselves as the guardians of that promise. They worked so long and hard to keep the faith alive in spite of the Roman influence with its Greek culture and religions. But because of Jesus, they thought what they built up was dangerously close to being torn down, because if Jesus proclaimed himself the new King of Israel, the Romans would move in and it would all be over. What did Caiaphas the High Priest say to his brothers in the Sanhedrin? "You know nothing at all. You do not understand that it is better for you to have one man die for the people than to have the whole nation destroyed."

So like a Mayan priest who'd cut the heart out of a human sacrifice to protect the tribe from the wrath of their gods, Caiaphas was ready to sacrifice Jesus so the Temple and all it represented so it would continue to just keep rolling along in what was then a Roman world.

Ironically, Caiaphas' plot was enfolded into God's plan. One man did die by his hand to save the world.

Salvation, that's an important word in the Christian lexicon. We accept Christ as our Lord and Savior because we want to be happy and peaceful in this life and we don't want to go to hell in the next. Certainly Christ promises the full, abundant life in this world and eternal life in the next, but we can't stop there.

Let's take a minute and consider the Exodus, an event as important to the Jews as Easter is to Christians. What's the link? In both cases God saved his people for a common purpose. Sure God heard the cries of the Jews in bondage the same way God hears our cry for freedom from our bondage. But there's an equally important reason

God saves us from our unpleasant realities, Jews and Christians alike are called “to be a blessing to all the families of the earth.”

Jesus called the disciples to proclaim the Gospel in word and deed to all the nations of the earth, not by playing it safe, not by protecting themselves, by controlling others to satisfy themselves. Instead Jesus said, “Make disciples of all nations, become a blessing to all the families of the earth, how? Deny yourself, pick up your cross and follow me.

The Palm Sunday story, standing on its own, ignoring what happened before and after can lull us into complacency. “Oh look! Jesus is riding on a donkey into Jerusalem and everyone was so happy to see him they waved their palms in the air and sang their joyous hymns of victory.” If that’s all we get from this story, we’re still in Sunday School.

However, if we can see Jesus as a risk taker and at the same time see ourselves in the Priests and Pharisees trying to save and protect the status quo, even willing to throw Jesus under the bus so we can keep our little niche in the world safe and sound, maybe we can see that God has something more important for us to do than what we’re doing now.

Jesus orchestrated his crucifixion from the start setting himself up to suffer and die for our salvation, yes, so our sins can be forgiven but equally important so we can be saved for a purpose, to be a blessing to all the families of the earth and to make disciples of all nations which includes the people in our own neighborhood.

Palm Sunday is the beginning of Holy Week, the death watch that will end when Christ allows himself to suffer and die for our salvation.

Here’s the question of the week to ponder and pray over as we recall Jesus’ sacrifice on the cross: What are you going to do about it, play it safe, protect yourself, your religion and your Church, or like Jesus take a risk and willing offer up yourself individually and corporately as the Body of Christ, as a living sacrifice, which is our spiritual worship? If I may paraphrase Caiaphas, if we don’t understand why we should do this, we don’t understand nothing.