

Reframed

Well friends, this is the final week of Lent, and our “Reframed” series. It’s been an amazing six weeks of seeing things from a new perspective and reframing our thinking in preparation for Easter. Over these weeks we experienced “Panoramic Perspective” through Scripture, found that we are all invited to “Get in the Picture” of God’s family, discovered second chances as we are invited to a photo “Retake,” explored “Perfecting Our Selfies” as we are challenged to look beyond ourselves, and embraced those moments that are “NOT Picture Perfect.” On this final Sunday of Lent – the Sunday we call “Palm/Passion Sunday” – we’re going to look through the lens and adjust the focus to see our faith in clean and crisp detail. If you have your Bible, or a Bible app, turn with me to Luke 19:28-40. **Read Luke 19:28-40.**

If history could be summed up into one word, that word might be “power.” People are obsessed with it. Visions of grandeur, complete control over the lives of ordinary people, and the goal of world domination have captivated aspiring leaders for thousands of years. You don’t have to read much history, or even much of the Old Testament, before coming to this realization. Delusions of power, authority, and control have long plagued the human race. From Napoleon to King Herod, and from Hitler to Stalin, much ink – and blood – has been spilled over men’s will to satisfy the insatiable desire to rule, influence, and lead with a strong arm.

Let’s face it. We’re more willing to follow – we’re more drawn to – a conquering warrior king than one who rules in peace. Jesus understands this. Just before our Gospel lesson this morning, Jesus has told a parable about a ruler who gives minas to his servants to invest and safeguard while he’s away. We’ve heard the story, more often as the wealthy man who gives his servants the talents. One servant gets ten, another five, and the third gets one. The man returns, and the first servant gives ten more that he had earned while the master was away, the second gives five more back that he has earned, and the wicked servant, buried the talent – or in Luke’s Gospel, laid the mina in a piece of cloth – and ends up getting reprimanded when the master returns.

Palm Sunday Parade

So Jesus has just told this story as He’s on the way to Jerusalem. Luke records: As He approached Bethphage and Bethany at the hill called the Mount of Olives, He sent two of His disciples, saying to them, “Go to the village ahead of you, and as you enter it, you will find a colt tied there, which no one has ever ridden. Untie it and bring it here. If anyone asks you, ‘Why are you untying it?’ say, ‘The Lord needs it,’” (Luke 19:29-31).

Things occurred for the disciples just as Jesus said they would. That's no shock to us, but to people in those days, experiencing it first-hand, it would have been. The disciples bring the colt – a young male donkey that's never been ridden before – back to Jesus, and put their cloaks across its back for Jesus to sit on as He rides into Jerusalem. Other people start joining the festivities. They start spreading their cloaks on the road in front of the donkey carrying Jesus. It soon turns into a massive parade.

And it gets noisy, pretty quickly. Luke states:

When He came near the place where the road goes down the Mount of Olives, the whole crowd of disciples began joyfully to praise God in loud voices for all the miracles they had seen: "Blessed is the King who comes in the name of the Lord!" "Peace in heaven and glory in the highest!" (verses 37-38).

Human Power is Short-Sighted

Hearing this upsets some of the on-lookers. Friends, anytime there's a crowd of people, there will always be somebody who's bent out of shape, or gets bent out of shape, about something. That's just human nature. In the case of our Gospel lesson, it's the Pharisees. "Some of the Pharisees in the crowd said to Jesus, 'Teacher, rebuke Your disciples!' 'I tell you,' He replied, 'if they keep quiet, the stones will cry out,'" (verses 39-40).

From His seat on the donkey's back, Jesus shows us the human thirst for a display of power is short-sighted. Power gained through demonstrations of intimidation, control, and force may win the day – they look great in parades – but ultimately they never last. Millions of leaders have used the strategy of demonstrating their strength since the beginning of time. They may have ruled for a season, maybe even had a generational influence during certain eras of history. But in the end, their "kingdom" rises and inevitably falls into the dust bin of history.

We could rattle off some various world leaders – maybe even American Presidents – from history, but the majority of us wouldn't know what they had done during their time in power. The people then were the same way. They wanted a mighty conqueror to come rushing in, kick out the Romans, usher in a golden age for the people of Judea, and recreate the kingdom of Israel. Except the Pharisees and Sadducees. They had cozied up with Rome, and were content with the power structures they had.

Free Will

So they don't like Jesus doing what He's doing. And they don't like how He responds to them when they tell Him to tell His disciples to stop. The thing is, we don't like being told what we're allowed – or not allowed – to do. It's insulting, and makes us feel small. The concept of being "told" blurs and distorts our view of ourselves as God's image bearers. We have this idea that we – and we alone – are privileged to do as we please because we're made in His image.

It's an entitlement mindset. And the Pharisees had it, too. The bigger picture is that in our belief that we are formed, created, and shaped in the image of God, we

have the responsibility of choice. Free will. Unlike plants and animals that surround us, we have options to choose – to either follow our instincts, or pick a different option – which may or may not serve our best interests. The idea that we’re forced to comply with a certain set of rules or directives – especially when they violate our morals, values, and ethics – should set off internal alarms that can’t be ignored.

A beautiful thing about Jesus is that He refuses to play into the tired old power plays of humanity. He’s not interested in taking over a government for political reasons, or seizing a throne to achieve His agenda. He refuses to be crowned “king” even when the crowds want to force Him into that position (see John 6:15). He disregards the disciples’ fascination with overthrowing Roman rule (check out Mark 10:35-45).

Jesus Turns Down Human Power Plays

He’s humble. He could have ridden into Jerusalem that morning on a beautiful white stallion. Look, that would have been more fitting for the Son of God – who sat at the right hand of God Almighty while the whole creation was spoken into existence. Instead, He chooses a pack animal to give people a sign that He’s not interested in our human ways of governing. It’s interesting that He rides in on a donkey – the message He sent to the crowds in doing so was a ceremonial one in which He’s letting them know that He comes in peace, to enact a treaty. He’s not a threat.

Throughout the Gospels, Jesus is encouraged to assume a human throne of authority. We talked about that at the beginning of Lent. One of the temptations the devil throws at Him is to be given all the kingdoms of the world if Jesus would only bow down and worship Satan. Each time a throne or a crown is offered to Jesus, He turns it down.

What did Jesus know about power that we so often miss? That loving, sacrificial service is the only power worth aspiring to possess. If someone wants to change the world, they do it by spending more time loving and less time scheming for leverage. Jesus led a movement by stooping at the feet of His friends and washing their feet. We’ll talk more about that on Thursday night at 7:00.

Adjusting Focus

If you want to change the world, you do it by avoiding public applause, and humbly embrace sacrifice, which Jesus will perfectly embody during this Holy Week. Real power, friends, isn’t held in a formal position. The most powerful force in the universe is found in the sweat, blood, and tears of a God who, “though He was in the form of God, did not consider being equal with God something to exploit. But emptied Himself by taking the form of a slave and by becoming like human beings. When He found Himself in the form of a human, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross,” (Phil. 2:6-8).

This Sunday commemorates Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem the week before He is crucified. As He rides into town, the people are waving their palm branches in celebration of His arrival. For many gathered that day, Jesus didn’t ride into town as the Messiah they were expecting. What they likely expected to view through their lenses

was a king or conqueror, coming to vanquish their enemies. Instead, He arrives as the Prince of Peace, riding not on a stallion with a sword drawn, but instead riding humbly on the back of a donkey.

Nearly 2,000 years have passed since that “triumphal entry.” Yet some of us in the Church are still looking through a lens with expectations of a militaristic God on the other side of the viewfinder. We expect to see a God who hates all of the same people that we do. In those times when we think this way, we need to adjust our focus.

He Did it All For Love

Even so, today we celebrate the triumphal entry of Jesus into Jerusalem. God’s people went there year after year to receive forgiveness of sin, renewal, and to celebrate. Things won’t end as victoriously as those people who threw their cloaks on the road and waved palm branches on that first Palm Sunday expected. This week which begins on such a high note will end in the darkness and silence of God’s Son crucified and buried in a borrowed tomb.

But Jesus knew how this story would end. Maybe that’s why He boosted Himself on a beast of burden – a common, working man and woman’s workhorse – an animal of peace that would result in the redemption of all people, throughout all ages, for all time. Many kings, rulers, emperors, and commanders in chief had already ridden into battle on white horses. The symbol was tired and expected.

The battle Jesus faced was entirely different, not waged with warring nations – but against the eternal forces of sin, death, and Hell – and couldn’t be won using conventional measures. This war – the epic battle against the most chronic disease plaguing humanity since the beginning of time – could only be won by Jesus, riding humbly into the Holy City of Jerusalem, on the back of an unriden donkey, with the intention to make peace between God and His people once and for all. But this battle could only be won through the humble, loving, and perfect sacrifice of God’s own Son, a mission He willingly, and willfully, embraced. As such, He became the most powerful Person the world has ever – or will ever – know. And He did it because of His great love for you, and for me, and for everyone else who has ever, or will ever, live!

When life gets out of focus and we become preoccupied with the things of this world, may we be like Jesus. He never gave in to the world’s system of power. He kept His eyes solely focused on pleasing His Father and completing His mission. As the apostle Paul would later say, “Therefore, if you were raised with Christ, look for the things that are above where Christ is sitting at God’s right side. Think about the things above and not things on earth,” (Col. 3:1-2).

Prayer: Giver of Light, Your steadfast love endures forever. Open our hearts to the Blessed One who comes so humbly, on a borrowed colt. Open before us the gates of Your justice, that we may enter, confessing with all our being in heaven and on earth that Jesus is Lord. Amen.