



# FROM THE PULPIT

## *North Shore Congregational Church*

### ***“Rebel Messiah”***

**Rev. Dr. Martin W. Hall – Preaching**

*Luke 19: 29-40; Luke 12: 49-56; John 5: 1-9*

*April 9, 2017 – Palm Sunday*

It’s quite a scene that the Gospel writers paint of this triumphal entry into Jerusalem. On the heels of healing and teaching so many – of performing signs and working miracles throughout the region – Jesus makes his way into Jerusalem and the news immediately begins to spread. Word of this prophet from Nazareth has already made its way through so much of the region and now that very same man was coming, again, into their city. Some of these people had seen him work miracles, some had witnessed his teachings, others perhaps had only heard tell of what this Jesus was doing. But, knowing in one form or another of his story, they begin to gather to welcome him – word spreads and the crowd grows – and the next thing you know, Jesus is entering into the city with throngs bellowing and palms waving in celebration and exaltation. The noise becomes so overwhelming that the Pharisees ask Jesus to put a stop to it – but Jesus replies only by pointing out that the excitement, the energy, the power of the moment is so remarkable that, even if he were to quiet the crowds, the stones themselves would shout out in praise. It’s an extraordinary scene. But, I have to admit that I have found myself wondering, this year, whether or not these people really understood who it was, and what it was, they were celebrating.

I have found myself wondering how many of those people understood the change, the paradigm shift, the foundational alteration in societal structure and expectation that was inherent in the teachings and spirit of this man they were cheering into town.

- There is no doubt in my mind that they had heard of his healings – the lepers he had cleansed, the lame he had healed, perhaps they’d even gotten word of Lazarus coming back from the dead.
- There is no doubt in my mind that they had been told of the manner in which he shared God’s love with anyone and everyone who was ready to receive it.
- There is no doubt in my mind that these people had gotten word of this remarkable prophet from Nazareth who was bringing tremendous works of God’s glory into the lives of the people.

But, I find myself wondering if they understood the rest of the story.

- Did they grasp that the lepers he cleansed were charged with going forth to proclaim the coming of God’s kingdom?
- Did they understand that the lame he healed were told to drop everything and follow him?
- Did they know that he left Lazarus to die, and his family to grieve for days, before Jesus restored him to life?
- Had they heard that, in addition to his miraculous healings and glorious welcome, he was commanding sinners to repent, telling rich people to give up everything they had, demanding that the haughty and righteous embrace the lowly and untouchable...

I could go on and on and on... But, I have found myself wondering, this year, how many of those people understood the change, the paradigm shift, the foundational alteration in societal structure and expectation that was inherent in the teachings and spirit of this man they were cheering into town. And, more importantly, for the many who were there that day that didn’t have a view of the fullness of what Jesus sought to create – would they still have been there cheering if they did?

Our ‘RE’ word study of the Lenten season brings us, today, to the very rebellious nature of the ministry of Jesus. “I came to bring fire to the earth...” Jesus said. “From now on five in one household will be divided, three against two and two against three...father against son...mother against daughter...mother-in-law against her daughter-in-law...” It’s such a striking, and in many ways cringe-inspiring passage, that we get in the twelfth chapter of Luke. I think it’s hard, sometimes, for us to imagine that this Jesus who came to share God’s love in a way never before seen, proclaimed or even imagined, would pronounce such harsh and divisive language for the people. And yes, I do think Jesus had a proclivity towards hyperbole at times – and I think this is one of those times. But, the underlying point that shines through the harsh shell that is these words, is that Jesus came to shake things up. Jesus came to make mince-meat of the status quo. Jesus came to name that which was, proclaim that which should be, and live a life that showed us how to move from the former to the latter. In other words, Jesus came to be the Rebel Messiah that enlivened the promises and glories of the faith by means of tearing down much of what society had become. He came to rebel against what had become normal, and acceptable and ok – that simply wasn’t normal, or acceptable, or ok in the eyes of God.

So, I wonder – did they get that? Those people on the streets that day – did they understand the fundamental change that Jesus was seeking to bring into the core of their society...that he was seeking to create in them? As they waved their palms and shouted their Hosannas, did they truly know what stood beside, beneath and beyond the healings and the miracles that were so readily reported throughout their city? And, more importantly, if they didn’t get it, would they have still cheered as hard if they did?

I honestly think that one of the most profound conversations of Jesus that we have in all of Scripture surrounds one constantly overlooked question in the fifth chapter of the Gospel according to John. Jesus comes upon a man at the Sheep Gate near the temple, who has been ill for 38 years. His precise illness isn’t described, but he clearly can’t move well and he spends his days, alongside many others who are ill and lame, at the side of the Bethesda pool. Without getting into a lot of detail, it’s important to understand that these people camped by the edge of

this pool because it would agitate and stir now and then, and it was the belief of the people that the agitation was the result of God's angel working in the water. The belief was that the first person to step into the water when it agitated would be healed. This man, of course, too slow from his infirmity, never gets in fast enough – he never receives that healing. Now, the story goes on, from the healing and focuses on the fact that the act took place on the Sabbath and the once-again argument that created between Jesus and the religious establishment of the time. But, so often overlooked in this passage is the very manner in which Jesus approaches the man at the pool. “Do you want to be made well?”

Think about that! What an utterly insane, and in many ways seemingly absurd question to ask. To a man who has been ill for 38 years, who spends his life on a mat at the edge of a pool hoping beyond hope to be able to get in fast enough to be healed when the waters stir – to this man who knows nothing but illness and lives for nothing but healing, Jesus turns and asks, “Do you want to be made well?” You know – they tell you, in elementary school, that there's no such thing as a dumb question, but some seem to come awfully close!

Still, as mind-numbingly ridiculous as the question seems on the surface, I think it brings us right back to those people cheering as Jesus made his way into Jerusalem. Because, in many ways, that man faced the same question I ask of those who were waving palms and shouting hosannas that morning. Of course, on the surface, he would want to be healed. Of course, at first blush, he would want to be made well. But, had he considered everything that came with that? Did he want the responsibility of living the life he'd been given to its fullest? Did he want to face the call of living his restored life in the light and love proclaimed by Jesus? If his body were to be healed, was he ready for what that meant for what his life ought to become and who he ought to be as a recipient of God's abundant and miraculous grace in his life? Did he really want to be healed – with all that comes along with it?

It's really the same question I ask of those who lined the streets that day in Jerusalem. It's easy to cheer the miracles. It's natural to celebrate the healings, and the acts of love, and the display of Godly power and presence in the lives of the people. And, today, it's glorious to look back on the story and know of the unbreakable and inalterable grace and love that was given to us on the cross. But, did they know of the profound and undeniable change this rebel Messiah sought to create in their world and in their lives? Were they ready for everything that came along with the glory in which they were rejoicing as they waved their palms in the air? Or perhaps, more to the point, are we?