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Scripture Citations from NIV (unless otherwise indicated)

Matthew 21:1-11

Long-Awaited and Yet Unexpected

Drill down to the core of our faith and what do you find? Ideas? Our faith certainly champions some awesome ideas: love, hope, compassion, justice, mercy, covenant, etc. What about doctrines? There are plenty of those too: Trinity, incarnation, justification by grace through faith, *sola scriptura*; the list goes on. Religious rituals? Certainly our faith would not be what it is without Baptism and the Lord's Supper. Are morals and ethics at the core, since what we believe is demonstrated by what we do? Could it be the book, the Bible? This book is like no other book. It's not just a good book but the written Word of God, sharper than a two-edged sword.

Drill down to the core of our faith and what do you find? I would argue that deep down at the core, it is not about ideas or doctrines or rituals or morals or ethics or even the Bible, as vitally important as all those are. Drill down to the core of our faith and we find the Living Word—a Person—Jesus—who walked this earth in a certain place at a certain time, who did certain things, and who had certain things done to him. As the Second Person of the Trinity, co-eternal with the Father and the Spirit, he has been around since before creation. But, Jesus, the incarnate Christ, walked this earth--mostly in Galilee and, finally, in Jerusalem--approximately 2,000 years ago.

Jesus belongs to the people of Israel. In him, God's promises to Israel and God's purpose for Israel are brought to fullness. Like David, the shepherd boy who became king, Jesus was born in Bethlehem. As the people Israel, in their infancy, found refuge in Egypt, so did Jesus, in his infancy. As God called Israel out of Egypt, so did God call Jesus.

Jesus grew up in Nazareth. He was baptized by John in the Jordan River. He traveled throughout Galilee for a few years with a group of followers, proclaiming the kingdom of God, demonstrating the kingdom of God, and teaching the kingdom of God. Then he came to Jerusalem. He entered the city riding on a donkey, surrounded by shouts of hosanna.

That was the first day of the last week of his earthly life. A few days later, during the evening that marked the beginning of the sixth day, he was

arrested. After the sun came up, he was crucified. On the seventh day, he rested in the tomb. On the eighth day, he was raised to new life.

At the core of our faith is a Person.

Every bit of Jesus' life interests us, of course, but every year when we get to this particular week in Jesus' life we slow down and we remember. We remember slowly. We remember vividly. We remember as if we were there when it happened...because in some sense we were.

Jesus reveals the God who created history and who has always been present and active in history. Most of the world divides history into two pieces—before Jesus was born and after. History itself turns with Jesus.

One week in Jerusalem sits at the center of history, from the first day of that week, Palm Sunday, to the eighth day of that week, Resurrection Sunday. The events of that week cannot be lifted out and planted any other place or any other time, because that week in history is rooted in history.

That week goes back through three years of ministry and thirty years of life to a manger scene in Bethlehem. And it goes back centuries more.

This week also goes forward...to a movement that spread from Jerusalem to the ends of the earth...to today, sweeping us up in the grand plan that God has for history...and continuing forward from here to the day when all is brought to fulfillment and completion, when God will wipe away every tear, when God will be in our midst and we will see him face-to-face and all will be just and right in the world.

On Palm Sunday Jesus rode into Jerusalem on a donkey and people shouted hosanna. Why was Jesus riding a donkey? Why were people shouting hosanna? What does it all mean?

To get the answers to these questions, we have to look at history. Sometimes, 2,000 years later, we lose track of how this all fits in history. But history is important.

It goes back through the pages of history to a man named Abraham and a woman named Sarah who were called by God to go to a place they did not know, to a future that was bigger than them and beyond then, to a future that was different from what they knew and more wonderful than they could imagine. We cannot understand Palm Sunday without remembering Abraham. God made promises to Abraham--to make of him a great nation and to bless all the nations through him.

Jump forward several hundred years. In the greatest event (pre-Jesus) in the history of the world, God worked through Moses to rescue the descendants of Abraham's grandson Jacob from slavery and deliver them from Egypt. God heard their cries and set them free. God led them through the wilderness to a place they did not know, to a future that was bigger than them and beyond them, to a future that was different from what they knew and more wonderful than they could imagine. This is the nation through whom God would redeem the whole world.

Jump forward again several hundred years. The time came that God's people went into exile. First Assyria overran the northern kingdom, Israel. Later Babylon overran the southern kingdom, Judea. Jerusalem was ransacked, and the temple was destroyed. After 70 years in exile, God brought those who had been exiled in Babylon back to Jerusalem. They rebuilt the temple. Still, things were never quite the same. Except for a brief period in the centuries before Jesus, Israel remained under the rule of some other empire. The kingdom never was re-established...not completely...not rightly...not the way God had promised it would be.

What kept the people going was remembering the exodus. God was faithful to them through the exodus. God would be faithful to them forever.

The people waited. Generation after generation, the people waited. As the centuries went by, they grew more and more certain that God would send the promised messiah soon.

There was no single set of expectations about who this messiah would be or what he would do. Some people expected that the messiah would be a great military leader who would rout the Romans and establish Israel as an independent nation. Some expected that he would be a priestly figure who would restore right worship in the temple. Some expected that he would come to a faithful remnant who had left the corruption of the world behind and formed a holy community in the wilderness. Some had no idea what exactly the messiah would do, but they were pretty sure that the messiah would lead them not back to the good old days but forward to something bigger than them and beyond them, something different from what they knew and more wonderful than they could imagine.

God had promised that he would be faithful to Israel. God was always faithful to his promises. God would be faithful to this promise.

Finally, in the fullness of time, at the right time, Jesus came. For three years Jesus and his followers went from town to town, mostly in

Galilee. Jesus proclaimed the kingdom of God. Jesus demonstrated the kingdom of God. Jesus taught the kingdom of God. For three years Jesus proclaimed and demonstrated and taught the kingdom of God, but he did it mostly in cryptic ways. He did it in ways that those with eyes to see could recognize, and he did it in ways that those with power could not nail down.

And then, on the day we call Palm Sunday, Jesus entered the capital city, the city of David, Jerusalem, riding on a donkey. This was a symbolic action. This was a political statement. Few Romans would have noticed the significance, but no Israelite would have missed the symbolism. That is why the people were so excited.

When Jesus sat on the donkey, he was proclaiming, 'The king has arrived'. When the people waved palm branches and shouted, 'hosanna', they were acknowledging his announcement. They were shouting "Lord, save us" with the expectation that that is exactly what God would do.

The long-awaited Messiah had arrived. But he acted in ways that were unexpected. He achieved a great victory, not over the Romans but over sin and death. He established right worship, not in the temple but in spirit and in truth. He set the kingdom of God in motion, not for a faithful remnant but for all people everywhere who would place their trust in him. He came to restore Israel...not back to the good old days...but forward to a new future...bigger than them and beyond them...different from anything they knew...and more wonderful than they could imagine.

Two thousand years later it is still true that Jesus is the Messiah we have been longing for, but perhaps not the one we expected. He came not to restore our kingdoms but to establish his kingdom. The God who acts in and through history is indeed faithful to his promises.

The God who acts in and through history established a congregation that came to be called Timber Ridge Presbyterian Church well over two hundred years ago in the wilderness of East Tennessee. He knew what he was doing. He had a plan. He still knows what he's doing. He still has a plan.

The God who has always been present in history is present here at Timber Ridge. The God who has always been active in history is active here at Timber Ridge. The Lord is leading us...not back to the good old days...but to a new future...that is bigger than us and beyond us...that is different from anything we know...and more wonderful than anything we can imagine.

Just like the Israelites of the first century, our imaginations are easily filled with visions of the good old days. Jesus came, however, not to take us back to when we were settled and in control but to move us forward to where he is in control, not to restore a lost kingdom of our imaginations but to establish his kingdom. The Lord has always been faithful. And the Lord is faithful...here and now.

Thanks be to God.