

April 1, 2012  
Questions for Lent and Easter

*The Palm Sunday Question*  
John 12:12-19

**Opening Words:** John Simone Sr. once said, "*The key to wisdom is knowing all the right questions.*" I think he is correct. Even without answers, questions have value. After all, what is a question? A question is nothing more than a request for more information. Only fools think they know everything. How many questions have you asked lately? Jesus asked twenty questions in the Gospel of John. Those questions are the foundation of my newest sermon series, *Questions for Lent and Easter*. Each one is an excellent question because each one is timeless. Before we read this morning text let me ask you this question.

Have you ever felt alone in a crowd? You are silent while everyone else is laughing. You are the one black and white face in a color photograph. You are uptight while everyone else is relaxed. If you have ever felt alone in a crowd, then you can relate (ever so slightly) to the Master on that first Palm Sunday. You know the scene. We visit it annually. This morning we will hear John's account of that historic day. May God give you ears to hear this morning's Gospel lesson, John 12:12-19. Let me call this message *The Palm Sunday Question*.

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**John 12:12-19** 12 The next day the great crowd that had come for the festival heard that Jesus was on his way to Jerusalem. 13 They took palm branches and went out to meet him, shouting,  
"Hosanna!"

"Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!"

"Blessed is the king of Israel!"

14 Jesus found a young donkey and sat on it, as it is written:

15 "Do not be afraid, Daughter Zion;

see, your king is coming,  
seated on a donkey's colt."

16 At first his disciples did not understand all this. Only after Jesus was glorified did they realize that these things had been written about him and that these things had been done to him.

17 Now the crowd that was with him when he called Lazarus from the tomb and raised him from the dead continued to spread the word. 18 Many people, because they had heard that he had performed this sign, went out to meet him. 19 So the Pharisees said to one another, "See, this is getting us nowhere. Look how the whole world has gone after him!"

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Tradition tells us that when Julius Caesar landed on the shores of Britain with his Roman legions; he took a bold and decisive step to ensure the commitment of his

troops. He ordered his men to march to the edge of the Cliffs of Dover; he commanded them to look down at the water below. To their amazement, they saw every ship in which they had crossed the channel engulfed in flames. Caesar had deliberately cut off any possibility of retreat. Now that his soldiers were unable to return to the continent, there was nothing left for them to do but to advance and conquer! And that is exactly what they did. Let there be no doubt about it. The issue of commitment is a big deal. How committed are you?

Jesus was totally committed to God's plan for the salvation of the world. Just think about everything Jesus experienced during that Holy Week. Just think about the wide range of emotions Jesus felt that Holy Week. There was the joy he felt on Palm Sunday. The crowds met him at the city gates and welcomed him like a conquering hero. There was the anger he felt when he cleansed the temple. There was the disgust he felt toward the fig tree, the symbol of Israel. He must have felt empowered when he taught about the Kingdom of God on Wednesday. There was the calm he felt on Maundy Thursday. He was calm when he washed the feet of the disciples and he gave them a living memorial. There was the fear he felt in the garden, and the rejection he felt when he was arrested. There was the anxiety he felt at his trials, and the pain he felt at his beating. There was the complete defeat he felt when he hung on the cross, and the chill of death he felt on Silent Saturday. There was the victory he felt when he breathed and opened his eyes from inside his tomb. There was the relief he felt when he appeared to the women, demonstrating his bodily resurrection. That week was a week like no other week. Let there be no doubt about it. Jesus was totally committed to God's plan for the salvation of the world. However, the crowd wasn't so committed.

The crowd was large, but the crowd wasn't committed. Each one of the Gospel writers emphasizes the size of the crowds. Matthew calls them a very large crowd (Matthew 21:8). Mark says many people spread their cloaks on the group, while others cut palm branches from nearby fields. Some people followed Jesus; some people ran ahead of Jesus (Mark 11:8-9). Luke says the crowd was so great, the twelve encouraged Jesus to rebuke them (Luke 19:39). In our Gospel lesson for today, John tells us a great crowd had gathered for the festival (John 12:12). All the Gospel writers tell us the crowd cheered for Jesus when he entered Jerusalem. You cannot question the fact that the crowd was large. You cannot question the fact that Jesus was the eye of the storm on that first Palm Sunday. However, you can question the commitment of the crowd. For the crowd that cheered for Jesus on Palm Sunday had disappeared by Good Friday.

It was the crowd that grabbed my attention as I prepared for this morning's message. What caused the crowd to abandon Jesus? One thing is clear. The problem was not Jesus. The Master was consistent throughout the week. The problem was the crowd itself. There are many reasons why the crowd left Jesus. Today, I want to look at three of the most obvious. I would like to say those reasons died with Jesus' generation, but I can't. People are still walking away from Jesus for these reasons. I hope that isn't your story. I hope you are truly committed to Jesus.

If you are ready to look at three reasons why people walked away from Jesus, say, **"Amen!"**

### **Trendy**

This is reason number one. Some found themselves in the crowd on that first Palm Sunday because Jesus was a celebrity. Let us call these people 'trendy'. What does trendy mean? It means fashionable. The name on everyone's lips that day was 'Jesus'. Why was Jesus so popular? Jesus was popular because Jesus was known as a miracle worker. Everyone knew the stories. Because of Jesus the blind could see, the lame could walk, the deaf could hear and the demoniacs were made whole. However, according to the Gospel of John, the greatest miracle was the resurrection of Lazarus. I can't say this too strongly: Jesus was a celebrity! Trendy people wanted to be near Jesus because Jesus was fashionable. Do you know any trendy disciples?

Years ago, my brother-in-law introduced me to the term "C and E People." You know who C and E People are. They are the people who only come to church on Christmas and Easter. They make up a significant number. We experience it here at Western Reserve. Our average weekly worship attendance is about 230 people. On Christmas Eve, we welcomed more than 500 people. Next week is Easter and we should welcome more than 400 people. Some of the people we see next week will not be seen again until December 24. That isn't being mean; that is being honest. Don't get me wrong. I am always glad to see the C and E People. However, I have to make a confession. I worry about them because there is more to Jesus than his birth and his resurrection. It bothers me they have such little exposure to Jesus. However, it doesn't seem to bother them. Do you think they will come to church next week to learn about Jesus? Do you think they will come to church next week for other reasons? Do you know of anyone who comes to church on Christmas and Easter because it is fashionable? Then you know a trendy disciple. Someone once said, *"You can be committed to a church and not be committed to Jesus. But you can't be committed to Jesus without a church."* If you know a trendy disciple, then say, **"Amen!"**

### **Users**

This is reason number two. Some found themselves in the crowd on that first Palm Sunday because they needed something from Jesus. The Master healed many people, but Jesus didn't heal everyone. There was no shortage of suffering in their world. They heard Jesus was coming and they had someone in their life who needed healing. Everyone knew someone who needed help. They came because maybe Lady Luck might smile on them. It was like playing the lottery. You can't win if you don't play. You can't really blame them. Jesus was their only hope. Do you know of anyone who has ever tried to use Jesus for a personal favor? Do you know of anyone who has ever tried to bargain with God? If you do, then you know a user. And all of God's people said, **"Amen!"**

## Misinformed

This is reason number three. Some found themselves in the crowd on that first Palm Sunday because they were misinformed. One of the reasons this scene is so loved is that it is easy to imagine. If you use your sanctified imagination, you can picture Jesus riding into Jerusalem on that simple animal. However, while it is easy to imagine the scene, it is hard to completely understand the scene. For, to completely understand the scene, you must understand the politics of that day. (Does anyone here understand the politics of our day?) The politics of that day revolved around foreign domination. The Roman Empire had come to their little corner of the world and oppressed the people. The Jews hated the Romans. They prayed for their liberation and longed to be rescued. They prayed that God would respond and send them a Messiah. They hoped Jesus was that political Messiah. They wanted Jesus to lead a political revolution. They wanted Jesus to be a political Messiah, so they did political things. They waved palm branches like he was a conquering military warrior. They yelled political slogans: Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! Blessed is the King of Israel! The problem was, he was not a political Messiah. Jesus has never been interested in politics. That section of the crowd was misinformed. He was a spiritual Messiah. Do you know of any misinformed disciples?

I love this story. Tommy Bolt was a professional golfer years ago. He knew success. For example, he won the U. S. Open in 1958. One day, he was playing in Los Angeles and had a caddy with a reputation of constant chatter. Before they teed off, Bolt told him, "Don't say a word to me. And if I ask you something, just answer yes or no." During the round, Bolt found the ball next to a tree, where he had to hit under a branch, over a lake and onto the green. He got down on his knees and looked through the trees and sized up the shot. "What do you think?" he asked the caddy. "Five-iron?" No, Mr. Bolt," the caddy said." What do you mean, not a five-iron?" Bolt snorted. "Watch this shot." The caddy rolled his eyes. "No-o-o, Mr. Bolt." But Bolt hit it and the ball stopped about two feet from the hole. He turned to his caddy, handed him the five-iron and said, "Now what do you think about that? You can talk now." "Mr. Bolt," the caddy said, "that wasn't your ball."

How many people do you know who are misinformed about Jesus? They think they have all the information, but they don't. I have spent my adult life studying Jesus, and I still have many questions. However, there is one thing I do know. Jesus is our only hope of salvation. How many people do you know who are trying to force Jesus to live up to their expectations? Have you have met a person who was disappointed in Jesus? Then you know a misinformed disciple! And all of God's people said, **"Amen!"**

A missionary society once wrote David Livingstone a letter. They wanted to send him help, so they asked, "Have you found a good road to where you are? If so, we want to know how to send other men to join you." Livingstone wrote back, "If you have men who will come only if they know there is a good road, I don't want them. I want men who will come if there is no road at all." What was Livingstone saying?

He was only looking for the truly committed, and so is Jesus.

Let there be no doubt about it. Jesus was completely committed to God's plan of salvation for the world. If you haven't heard, he was so committed that he died on a cross. The question is not if Jesus was committed. The question is how committed are you? Is there anyone here guilty of being a **trendy** disciple? You only want to talk about Jesus when it is the popular thing to do. Is anyone here guilty of being a **user**? You only think about Jesus when you need something. Is anyone guilty here of being a **misinformed** disciple? How much is the faith altering your life? Is anyone here trying to get Jesus to live up to your standards? How committed are you? Rick Warren once said, *"Nothing will shape your life more than the commitments you make."* And all of God's people said, **"Amen!"**