

The Unexpected Candidate

Palm Sunday 2016

Matthew 21:1-11

This was **not** the candidate they'd had in mind.

For months, no, years, they'd been looking for just the right person ...

someone who could lead them to victory,

someone who could crush their opponents with ease.

Someone who really had what it took, you know,

someone who could unify the people, not just the base, but the outliers, the undecideds,

and just, finally, get the job done.

And they thought, they really thought, that it was going to happen this year.

That this would -- finally -- be the year.

Because the word had come in from the countryside that the right person had been found.

The word had reached Jerusalem that there was finally an outstanding candidate for Messiah.

Outstanding.

Some guy who had been drawing crowds all over the place,

Some guy who didn't seem to be at all afraid of, well, anything --

someone who was ready to speak truth to power.

And that's what they need. A gutsy guy.

It was Jerusalem in the year 33,

and the people of Israel had been under Roman occupation for a long time now,

yearning for rescue,

desperate for someone to give them their country back.

And when they thought *Messiah*, that's what they pictured -- someone who would stir up the people, lead the revolution, get the Romans the heck on out of Jerusalem, and seize the throne, his rightful throne.

And this Jesus, this Jesus that the whole countryside was talking about, had sounded like the real deal.

Had sounded.

Now they weren't so sure. On this Sunday of his first appearance in the capital city, now they weren't so sure.

The first weird thing was when he sent in his advance team, who, you might think, would be looking to set up a pretty dramatic entrance, maybe get some good press, some good buzz out of this.

Maybe line up some people to carry Jesus in on some kind of throne type thing.

Instead, they'd asked around for a donkey for him to ride in on.

What? How was that Messiah-like?

And now here he was.

The people had turned out, yeah, because the word had spread, and hopes were running high.

The crowds were shouting Hosanna, blessed is the Messiah, blessed is the one who comes in God's name.

And in the midst of it:

a guy on a donkey, dressed kinda poorly, head bowed, quiet.

No speeches,

Just this quiet, humble, lowly figure moving slowly forward through the crowds seeking salvation.

Oh boy.

This was **not** the candidate they'd had in mind.

Way back when,

the year before I came here,

I was a student minister at Center Church in New Haven,

the big beautiful Congregational Church right in the middle of the Green.

It was an election year, 1988, and the presidential candidates who came to town liked to come to our church, 'cause it was old and big and a great photo backdrop.

Michael Dukakis, the Democratic candidate, came calling one evening, just a couple months away from losing.

I was there at the front door, gathered with all the rest of the curious to greet him.

It was pouring rain. And as Dukakis came through the door,

a short, weary man, now soaking wet,

the woman next to me, who did not have a quiet voice,

said "That's it? *That's* him??"

The poor man visibly winced.

In the crowds that day in Jerusalem,

in the crowds desperately hoping that the reign of the Romans was nearing its end,

in the crowds straining for a peek at the Messiah ,

there had to have been a whole bunch of folks who said "That's it?? That's him??"

This quiet guy riding on a donkey, head bowed?

That's it?

Oh, this was not the candidate they'd had in mind.

And if they'd hoped that his campaign swing that week through Jerusalem would bring some reassurance about his qualifications, well, frankly, there was nothing about what he did the next few days that made them feel any better.

He was spotted having dinner at a the home of a leper.

He was seen in conversation with a woman of notoriously ill-repute, speaking kindly to her.

He sat around with children talking to them about God.

What in heaven's name did this have to do with conquering the Roman Empire?

By Wednesday, it was clear to everyone that this campaign was going south, and by Friday --

well, by Friday, just about everybody had given up in disgust, kicking themselves for ever thinking that this strange and gentle man could possibly have been the Messiah.

This was NOT the candidate they'd had in mind.

Palm Sunday is the day when God says,
"people, here's my candidate for Messiah.

I know it's not who you expected.

But this is who I choose.

Palm Sunday, for me, always takes on special poignancy in an election year. Because as we watch candidates scramble for votes and popularity, as scramble they must, here is this remarkable, unexpected candidate,

God's candidate,
who in the end was not at all what the people of Jerusalem expected,
what the world expected.

Not a vote-getter.

He wasn't a conquering hero, he was a quiet man riding on a donkey.
Not someone who rode into the palaces of power,
but someone who sat with lepers.
Not someone who succeeded in any way that was expected,
but someone who in the end refused even to save his own life.

This was not the candidate they had in mind.

This, this unexpected Messiah, was not who *anyone* had in mind.

And so Palm Sunday is the day when I most keenly remember
that we are asked by an unexpected Savior to live in unexpected ways.
This, Palm Sunday, is when I remember that we too are asked to live in ways
not expected by this world:

to define success by the measure of our love,
to live lives of unexpected compassion and startling mercy,
to choose uncommon humility and surprising tenderness.

The one we follow is the Unexpected One.

The path he calls us to follow is the path of unexpected love.

There's a story David likes to tell about the unexpected,
a story from his earliest years with Habitat for Humanity in India.
He was meeting with a bunch of Indian leaders,
and a controversy of sorts had emerged --
the question was, since Habitat was a Christian organization,
shouldn't the homes that they built be designated just for Christian Indians.

So David said this to them:

he said, "it would not be surprising for Christians in America to send money to Christians in India to build decent homes for poor Christians.

But it *would* be a wonderful surprise if Christians in America raised money to send to Christians in India to build houses for poor Hindu and Muslim families or for those from a caste that has looked down on you.

So let the Gospel be a surprise."

And that's what they did.

And that's what has worked.

The Gospel as a surprise, grace unexpected, homes for thousands built by Christians for Hindus, Hindus for Muslims, inspired, all of it, by the love shown to us by an unexpected Messiah.

All over the world,

right now, are people living in ways not expected by this world, choosing lives of uncommon mercy and surprising compassion.

A story that I cannot get out of my mind is one I read a few months back in the Times,

It was about a doctor named Tom Catena,

from Amsterdam, New York, who is now living in the Nuba mountains of South Sudan.

In 2005, after finishing medical school, he signed up for a two-year stint as a medical missionary in Kenya.

A deeply faithful Christian, he believed it was right to begin his medical career by offering his services to the poor.

When his two years was finished,

the expected thing was for him to come home, back to this country, and start a practice.

Instead, he went to Sudan.

He'd heard about a hospital in the mountains,
the Mother of Mercy Catholic Hospital, which had no doctor.
And so, for the past eight years, Tom Catena
has been the medical director, and chief and only surgeon
at Mother of Mercy.

He does it off the grid,
no electricity or phone lines most of the time,
no x-ray machine;
the hospital has been bombed a dozen times.
The local tribal Chief calls him "Jesus Christ,"
explaining that Jesus healed the sick, made the blind see and helped the lame
walk — and that is what Dr. Tom does every day.

And there was one sentence in the article which has stuck with me,
actually it was a column written by Nick Kristof, and there was this line that got
me:

Kristof wrote this: "There are many, many secular aid workers doing heroic
work.

But the people I've encountered over the years in the most impossible places
— like the Nuba Mountains, where anyone reasonable has fled —
these people are *disproportionately unreasonable because of their faith.*"

I loved that.

Unreasonable because of their faith.

Which is to say, doing the unexpected.

Which is what can happen when you follow the unexpected Messiah
and the Gospel of Surprise.

Most of us aren't headed for Sudan.

So here's a simpler story.

A while back, a friend of mine, one who's not much for religion in general, came for a visit and flopped down on my sofa.

"Want to hear a story about God?" she said.

Kind of a surprising conversation-starter from her, so I answered, maybe a little too flippantly, "sure, I'm always up for a good story about God." So she told me that she and her husband had just closed on a tiny little cottage in New Hampshire.

"And get this," she said, "the woman who's lived there for 20 years met us at the door to give us her grandmother's quilt as a housewarming gift."

"That's really nice," I said, wondering where the God part came in.

"No, you don't understand," my friend said.

"Last week at work was so tense and awful that I was barely eating or sleeping.

My doctor gave me sleeping pills.

My friends told me to listen to guided meditations, I tried ten different ones.

And then that woman met me at the door with her quilt.

She didn't even know me, and she gives me her grandmother's quilt.

And I know it sounds nutty," said my friend, "but that restored my soul.

It restored my soul where none of that other stuff could.

It was just this crazy, unexpected, absolutely loving thing that made the world seem merciful again,

made goodness seem possible again.

So I figure -- that's God, right?"

"Yeah," I said, "Yeah, I think it is."

"I want to try to live like that from now on," she said. "I'd like to go around surprising people with love like that."

So one story of a career shaped by love for God;
the other a story of what you might call a random act of kindness,
an unexpected mercy which poured love into a thirsting soul.
Both of them ways of following an unexpected Messiah,
startling the world with surprising goodness.

Jesus of Nazareth, the carpenter from Galilee,
was not the Messiah who was expected.
Not the one wanted or hoped for.
Palm Sunday and the week that followed made that clear:
the quiet, gentle man riding on a donkey was not the triumphant hero people
had in mind.

What this unexpected Messiah brought was this:
the gift of God's own self to a world in desperate need,
a life lived in humility and offered up in courage,
God's very life given freely and in love.
It wasn't the salvation people sought,
but it was the salvation they needed:
a gift of holy mercy not confined to any time and place,
but once and forever and for all.

We follow *him*, the unexpected Messiah.
And to live in his way is to discover that salvation.
To surprise with compassion,
to start people with mercy and bewildering generosity,
this is the way our souls are restored,
this is the way our world is restored.

Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord:

The unexpected Messiah.
Hosanna in the highest. Amen.