

“GMO Jesus”

A Sermon by Rev. Jack Miller

Preached April 9, 2017, Beaufort, SC

Matthew 21:1-11

Matthew 26 & 27 (Selected Verses)

There is a story about a very judgmental woman who attended a small church that spent a lot of time focused on what people should not be doing. One day she got the deacons to invite a noted fire and brimstone preacher to visit. He began his sermon by shouting, “God is going to judge everyone!” “Everyone who has taken the Lord’s name in vain,” he yelled, “God’s going to judge you!” “Amen!” the woman shouted. “Everyone who has looked at another person with lust in their heart, God’s going to judge you!” “Amen! Preach it!” she yelled, rocking back and forth in the pew. “Everyone who gambles and plays Bingo,” he declared, slamming his fist onto the pulpit, “God’s going to judge you!” The woman stopped her rocking. Having just won \$5 in the Bingo the night before, she turned to the woman sitting next to her and said, “Well now he’s stopped preaching and gone to meddling.”

Like the woman in this story who welcomed the preacher with warmth, the crowd in Jerusalem cheered Jesus with enthusiasm, pomp, and expectation. Like the woman in the story who quickly began grumbling against the preacher, the crowd quickly turns on Jesus. The shouts of “Hosanna!” ringing through the streets fell silent, and shouts of “Crucify him!” spilled with ease from their lips. It happened so quickly – in the rhythm of a sermon, in the passage of a few days’ time. The preacher in the story did not live up to the woman’s expectations of what he should say and what he should do. Jesus did not live up to the crowd’s expectations of what he should say and what he should do.

Jesus enters Jerusalem as a renowned prophet who proclaims good news to the poor, heals the sick, eats with common folk, and tries to get the Pharisees and Sadducees to lighten up

a little. This crowd believes that Jesus is something special, and if they are right about him, then they greet him with a lot of expectations about what he is about to do for them. Matthew's Gospel paints for us a very detailed picture of Jesus' journey into the city that day. The astute listener picked up on the fact that Jesus did not ride into Jerusalem on just one donkey, but two donkeys! Now some might imagine this is a veiled reference to Jesus' girth. However, I believe the reason Matthew is so particular about mentioning the two animals is because it fulfills a prophetic statement recorded in the Old Testament book of Zechariah: "Lo, your king comes to you; triumphant and victorious is he, humble and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey." Zechariah's prophesy goes on to describe a messianic king who, with his army, "shall be like warriors in battle, trampling the foe in the mud of the streets; they shall fight... and they shall put to shame the riders on horses" (10:5).

If this is what Jesus has come to do, then why wouldn't the people line the streets, waving branches, strewing their coats on the roadway, and hailing him as king and conquering hero. Yet rather than make his way from the city gate to the governor's front door, cleansing Zion and overthrowing the empirical powers with violent force, he makes his way to the heart of the city where he enters the temple and chases out the merchants and money-changers. He goes on to tell the crowds veiled stories against the chief priests, the Pharisees, and the Sadducees; finally, he denounces them by pronouncing a series of judgmental woes against them. Jesus is to them what the preacher became to the woman: a meddling nuisance who is making them awfully uncomfortable. No wonder those same leaders look for a reason to kill him. But why are the crowds so quick to follow their prompting? Why do *they* turn on him so quickly?

Jesus lets them down. He disappoints them. He does not live up to their expectations. And so, he becomes almost worthless to them. His ultimate value, we see, is in exchange for

another Jesus – Jesus Barabbas – a zealous revolutionary who wanted to overthrow the Roman authorities with violent force – which is exactly what they expected of Jesus. They wanted Jesus on their terms, and if they could have changed him, persuaded him to do what they wanted him to do, rather than what he did, then perhaps he would have been victorious over Rome, restoring the city of Jerusalem to the Jewish people, and taking his rightful place on David’s earthly throne. But that is not what happened.

It could not have happened that way. For Jesus to do what the crowds wanted him to do, his very identity would have to change. His very DNA would have to change. And maybe the crowd would find contentment with that (although, personally, I find it rare that people really are content when they get what they think they want). They chose Barabbas, showing me that they would have been fine with a modified Jesus, especially if he produced the result they wanted in the way they wanted it. To put it into contemporary parlance, the people wanted a GMO Jesus – a genetically modified organism who gave them all the results they wanted without any of the ugly blemishes. Yet Jesus, who is the Word of God made flesh, who, according to John, *is* the very mind, the very will of God, could do nothing other than what he did. They wanted Jesus to deny his very nature. Yet Jesus was not content to allow such a profound shift in who he was, and neither was God.

You see, people like Judas, the people who made up the crowd who were so willing to call for Jesus’ death, they did not really understand who God was, or who God’s Messiah was supposed to be. They loved to read the bloody passages of Zechariah, just like we love the bloodiest headlines in the newspaper, especially when those parts related to their own restoration and salvation. Honestly, who among us does not love a story where the good guy wins and the bad guy finally gets what’s coming to him? Yet in their zeal and passion for the violent

overthrow of foreign rulers, they neglected certain other passages that spoke of a suffering servant, of implements of war being repurposed as farm equipment, or lines in Zechariah that told them that the Messiah “shall command peace to the nations” (9:10).

Jesus was trying to show them that love, mercy, and peace were his ways – were God’s ways. They were so central to who he was that they were like elements of his DNA. To change them would make him something different than God, and that was a compromise he would not make. Why? Because if he changed, he might win a temporary victory in the earthly realm, but if he remained the same, took up his cross and made the ultimate sacrifice, he would win the ultimate victory – victory over death itself.

In a moment, we will affirm our faith with a passage from Philippians that tells us who Jesus is and what he did. At the beginning of that passage, Paul tells us to, “Let the same mind be in [us] that was in Christ Jesus.” In other words, we need have the same DNA in us that was in Jesus – love, mercy, peace. We cannot bend Jesus to our will, but we must always be working to bend our will to a place where it more closely looks like his.

The irony is that we are created in God’s image – we have God’s breath in our lungs and God’s DNA at our core. We can be people of love, mercy, and peace, doing things that defy expectations because we know the ultimate victory is more important than temporary glory. Rather than turn on him like Judas or the crowd, Jesus invites us to turn towards him, as hard as it may be, so that we can experience the fullness of life that breaks free from the tomb. We have within us the DNA of life – love, mercy, peace. May that guide everything we say, and everything we do, even when the crowd is calling us to become something different.