

God Is Coming

Luke 19:28-40

Palm Sunday, (April 10) 2022

Kyle Childress

“You can’t help someone until he or she wants help.” That’s what I was taught in seminary and that’s what many of us have been taught. Either in school or in some other way, we’ve been taught to think that you can’t help someone until they seek help.

Some time ago, an old friend of mine who is a pastor in another state, and I talked over the phone about things we’ve done in ministry that we never were prepared for by seminary. He remembered when he was a young and new pastor he had to help get a man in his church into an adult treatment center for alcoholism, and the man did not want to go. He said, “I felt guilty about the whole thing. His wife and I came up with a plan. We called it, giving him a ‘talking to,’ before we knew to call it an intervention. I had two of my deacons come with me; two big ones. After the talking to, we put him in the back seat of the car with the deacons on either side. I drove with his wife in the front passenger seat to the Alcohol Treatment Center for a month of residential therapy. She cried the whole way and at times the deacons had to hold him down in the back seat.”

He went on. “Once we got there, and he had been sedated, now resting in his room at the treatment center, I told the treatment counselor what we had always been taught, “You can’t help somebody until they want help.”

“That’s dumb,” responded the tough therapist. “Who in the world would want this help? In the next month we are going to put him through hell. We will force him to look at his life, and all that’s ugly, to stare at his addiction in the face. I would be worried about somebody who would want that. If you ever get a person who actually wants to be helped, he doesn’t need help! No, most of our people come here reluctantly and sometimes forced. Somebody loves them enough to say; ‘I can’t be married to you any longer unless you get help. Either get help, or I’m out.’ Or their boss says, ‘Get help, or I’m going to fire you.’ Or sometimes it’s worse; they find themselves on the street. They find themselves forced to face change. That’s how most change begins.”

This is hard. We know how difficult it is to help someone in addiction or denial. And it is absolutely true that the addicted person does have to face some responsibility. At the same time, we all know that “you can’t help people until they want help” tends to let the rest of us off the hook. It can be easier for me to sit back and say, “She knows my phone number. When she wants help, she’ll come get it. You know how it is, you can’t help people until they want help.”

That way, help, is never my responsibility. We say that we do not know what to say, which is usually true. Someone whose son or daughter has died, we don’t know what to say and we are reluctant to enter the pain with them, so we don’t call or don’t go by and see them.

Besides, sometimes hurting people unconsciously conspire to keep their friends at a distance. “You can’t know what I’m going through,” they sometimes say. Between their pushing us away and our own reluctance, we keep our distance.

I wonder how much we think of God in the same way. Years ago, in Rabbi Kushner's popular, *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*, he wrote about a God who holds back. We have a sympathetic, even empathetic God, who feels our pain. However, God can't do much about it. The world has been set up according to certain immutable natural laws. God doesn't want to disrupt things by getting personally involved, certainly not by breaking any of the laws. When the laws of nature come crashing down on our heads, God, while regretting this, cannot get too implicated. "You know my phone number. Call me at 10:45 on Sunday morning. But don't call me after 10:00 at night."

In Reynolds Price's, *Letter to a Man in the Fire: Does God Exist and Does He Care*, Price says that we have just got to get out of our heads the pious notion that God is involved in everything that goes on in the world. There is too much world and too little God for God to be blessed or blamed every time that something happens that causes us concern.

These stories of a distant, uninvolved God do not match up with the God we get today, Palm Sunday. Today's story is of a parade, a procession that enters Jerusalem, with Jesus at the head. Today, Jesus intrudes into Jerusalem. He could have stayed away. In fact, throughout his ministry, when he spoke of going up to Jerusalem, his disciples urged him to avoid the trip. They knew. Powerful enemies were there, plotting against him. Jerusalem almost certainly would be the place of his death. And yet he set his face like flint toward the capital city.

What do we do with this image of God? More importantly, what does this image of God do with us?

You've seen the statues of Buddha seated in meditation upon a lotus pad, eyes closed, hands held out gracefully as a sign of peace.

Jesus is not seated upon a lotus blossom. He is bouncing upon the back of a borrowed donkey, moving toward the city where, by the end of the week, he will face betrayal, torture, and death. We also call this "Passion Sunday," from the Latin meaning "to suffer." That's where he resolutely rides and how he will eventually die.

Jesus intrudes. He sticks his nose in our business, in our world. Earlier in his ministry he said, "Come unto me, all you who are weary and heavy laden ..."

Today, he comes to us, riding a donkey into our lives.

He is surrounded by a crowd, some of whom wish him well, others who wish him ill. Children, wave palm branches in welcome. Others seek to set the wheels in motion of finally shutting Jesus up. Into the midst of this cauldron of humanity with praise and hosanna on one hand and danger and conspiracy on the other, comes Jesus.

The modern world, in order to make itself work, needed to pacify and domesticate God. Some of it is an old deism that said God was a distant watchmaker who made the world and then let it run on its own, while God stays out of the way. At the same time, others have created a pious God of the heart who saves us from sin on a cross 2,000 years ago, but otherwise, never comes out of our

hearts or comes down from heaven.

What these views mean is that with God distant and safely out of the way from our day-to-day particulars, we can do what we want. We can cry and holler, beat on pulpits and carry gigantic Bibles, while also carrying guns, building walls, spewing forth bigotry, and never worrying what this God thinks or if we're being faithful or not.

I remember a professor I had in the English Dept. in college. He was good – and I mean good, but we were all about half-scared of him. A classmate said, “He cares about us. He cares enough to get in our face.”

Good teachers intrude.

On most Sundays if I asked you what you believe about Jesus what would say? The classic Apostle's Creed, which is in our hymnal, says, “he was born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified and buried.” Note that it's all in the passive voice, which I was taught in Miss Rozella Veazey's Seventh Grade English class was a sign of grammatical weakness. Jesus is rendered thereby into a sort of divine automaton who passively is brought on to the scene, passively to be born, to suffer, and to die. He becomes a victim.

But not today. The beginning of the story goes all the way back to where God speaks into the silence, light intrudes into the darkness, with a word “God said, ‘let there be light ...’” and there was (Gen. 1).

And the story ends, in the last book of the Bible, with the holy city of God coming down to earth, intruding among us: “Behold the dwelling place of God is with humanity. God with them, God will wipe every tear from their eyes, death will be no more ...” (Rev. 21:3).

Something’s going on. I am sorry, if you thought that we had God safely figured out and explained. This God is on the move. God is not hunkered down at church. God is not ensconced simply in our hearts and God is not entrenched in heaven.

God is coming, intruding, intervening. God in Christ comes, not necessarily to fix what is wrong with the world but to reclaim the world. He comes bringing another Way. He intrudes into this old world of violence, domination, hatred, and suspicion bringing another realm that is in conflict with the kingdoms of this system. Christ enters into Jerusalem, enters into the Empire of Rome, and enters into our entrapped lives breaking these bonds and addictions. He comes into our hurt and pain. He enters our isolation and depression. He enters our secrets and the shines light into the shadows.

Toward the end of this week, Jesus says to Pilate, the emissary of the Empire, “My kingdom is not of this world” (John 18:36). We usually think Jesus means that his kingdom is spiritual, ethereal. Instead Jesus is telling this Roman official, “The God who created the heavens and the earth is here! The kingdom of justice and peace is invading.”

Back in the 60’s when racist White Power people complained that “outside

agitators” were coming in and causing trouble, they were more right than they realized. Christ is an outside agitator stirring up good trouble.

Crucifixion awaits Jesus at the end of this week. It was a death chosen just for those who dared stand against Rome. This, Jesus took upon himself. He absorbed the brutality of domination and cruel power.

And if Jesus had responded in kind. If he had taken the anger and fear and hatred and responded with his own dominating power, even though he was the victim, even though he would have been completely justified, then nothing would have changed. The old way would have won. Might would have still made right.

Instead, Jesus responded by taking all that could be thrown at him – even torture and death – and gave back forgiveness. Instead of vengeance, he gave back grace. Instead of righteous indignation, he gave back love. Jesus rode in, intruded, encroached and upset the status quo, not because he was a nice guy and not because he believed that we were all just wanting to be sweet people. Christ came to cleanse our corrupt religion, challenge our power politics, unmask our deceit, stand against the violence that permeates our society, and break the power of systems of racism and wealth. On the cross he embraced us so we might be set free from the bondage to Darkness and Death.

In 1966 Abuna (Father) Elias Chacour was the new and young pastor of the Melkite Roman Catholic church in Ibillin, Israel. The town, about half the size of Nacogdoches, was mostly Arabic speaking Muslim but with significant numbers of Palestinian Christians, and Israeli Jews, and for years these diverse but overlapping

populations were at odds with one another. Father Chacour was committed to interfaith dialogue and building relationships, though without any success.

He received a note that said that “Begin to first reconcile brothers, sisters, families together.” He wrote that he was stung by the “absolute truth” of those words. So, on Palm Sunday, in the midst of an overflowing congregation, he decided to do something. While celebrating the Eucharist behind the iconostasis (the screen), he felt the burden of broken relationships.

At the conclusion of the liturgy, he came out from behind the iconostasis, walked down the center aisle, to the only doors to the church, took out the old heavy key and locked the doors. He then came back up the aisle, turned and faced the people telling them he loved them and that he was grieved over the bitterness in their lives. He went on,

*This morning while I celebrated the liturgy, I found someone who is able to help you. In fact, he is the only one who can work the miracle of reconciliation in this village. The person who can reconcile you is Jesus Christ, and he has come to us. He is here with us. He rode in triumph into Jerusalem with hosannas ringing in his ears.*

*So on Christ’s behalf, I say this to you: The doors of the church are locked. Either you kill each other right here in your hatred and then I will celebrate your funerals for free, or you use this opportunity to be reconciled together before I open the doors of the church. If that reconciliation happens, Christ will truly become your Lord... The decision is now yours.*



Ten minutes passed without anyone saying a word. Total silence. Finally, one man stood up. A man serving as an Israeli policeman, still in uniform. With tears streaming down his face, he stretched out his arms asking for everyone's forgiveness and that he asked God to forgive him, too. Chacour embraced him. Others stood and asked for forgiveness and went to each other and embraced and then were embraced by Chacour. This went on for some time, until Chacour told them that they were now one community and forbade them to become divided again. He added, "This is not Palm Sunday any longer. This is our resurrection! We are a community that has risen from the dead, and we have new life. I propose that we don't wait until next Sunday, until Easter, to celebrate the resurrection. I will unlock the doors so we might go home and throughout the village and sing the resurrection hymn to everyone." He then went back, unlocked the doors and later, had the locks removed and threw away the key (see Elias Chacour, *We Belong to the Land*, pp. 26-33).

This week is the holiest of weeks. After two years of us in shock and isolation, hunkering down, Christ intrudes and unlocks the doors, so we will be at one with one another. If we want resurrection next Sunday, we have this week to join with Christ and make peace.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. One True God,  
Mother of us all. Amen.