

WGUMC April 9, 2017 Palm Sunday: "Jesus in Stages"  
Matthew 21:1-11

I like going to the Fourth of July Parade in Boulder Creek. Small town parades are fun and there's something for everyone. Little kids like the clowns and candy. Old men like the antique cars and military surplus vehicles. Dogs like everything but the fire engines, blasting their sirens. The horses are my favorite part of the parade.

But there were no horses in the parade on that first Palm Sunday, only one guy on a donkey. But if there was only one man in the parade, why were there so many different Jesus's in Jerusalem? I guess it's because everyone saw the Jesus they wanted to see. They followed the Jesus who met their need.

I've been talking about the stages of faith for weeks now and what I've learned from James Fowler is that we have different needs at different times in our life. So it is no surprise that our understanding of Jesus changes as our needs change.

Like every other truth we encounter in life, we get to know Jesus in stages.

The crowd that lined the parade route in Palestine was made up of people of all different stages of faith and they had very different ideas about Jesus. The Stage One followers came to see Superhero Jesus, the one they had heard so much about, the one who turned water into wine, restored sight to the blind, gave 5,000 their fill of bread and raised Lazarus from the dead. These are the people who couldn't believe that Jesus could ever get himself into a situation that he couldn't magically get out of. So the Stage One believers felt personally betrayed when Jesus got himself arrested. All of a sudden the magic stopped working. In the end, the Superhero Jesus could save others, but he could not save himself.

Stage Two believers held out a different hope for Jesus. These folks weren't interested in the magic but they were interested in the Messiah. It was the story they told their kids

and grandkids: God was going to send them a righteous king to restore the kingdom of David. Could Jesus be that king? Could a carpenter's son measure up to the Messiah myth? The Prophet Zechariah had said,

Rejoice greatly, O daughter Zion!  
Shout aloud, O daughter Jerusalem!  
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. [Zech 9:9]

So when Jesus told his disciples to go get him a donkey, he knew exactly what he was doing, and the Stage Two believers were taking notes, waiting to see what would happen next. Jesus humble and riding on a donkey was one thing, but being whipped and beaten and humiliated by the Romans was another thing altogether. When the soldiers put a crown of thorns on him and mocked him as the king of the Jews, Jesus didn't come across as a very believable Messiah for those in Stage Two.

The Stage Three believers in the crowd had very conventional views of the faith. And when Jesus came to town, they were eager to fit him into their conventional categories. At first, Jesus wore the mantle of a conventional prophet pretty well. He did everything a prophet was supposed to do: he came bringing good news to the poor. He came speaking truth to power. He called out the Pharisees and scribes for their hypocrisy. Shortly after arriving in Jerusalem, he went to the great temple and overturned the tables of the moneychangers. As long as he was talking about cleansing the temple, he was being a good prophet and staying within approved boundaries for his Stage Three believers.

When he started talking about destroying the temple and in three days building it back up, he went out of bounds. Attacking the very center of Jewish identity, the focal point of Jewish power, was not something any good Jew would ever do.

Clearly, the conventional categories could not explain to Stage Three believers what Jesus was trying to do.

Stage Four followers of Jesus were the ones who were anxious to challenge the status quo. They could see the corruption in the religious system as clearly as they could see the abuse of power in the political system. They could tell that the whole situation was unsustainable and that rebellion was inevitable. And they hoped Jesus would incite it. Perhaps he would even lead it.

At first, the signs were hopeful. He came in on a donkey, which was a beautiful piece of political theater. He caused a riot in the temple when he ran out the moneychangers. The Romans were getting nervous, because every day, the crowds were getting bigger and more restless. They knew it wouldn't take much to set them off.

Then came the news that one of Jesus' closest associates had tipped off the temple police. But Jesus didn't let his

disciples defend him when the mob came for him. When someone struck the High Priest's slave, Jesus said, "Put your sword back into its place; for all who take the sword will perish by the sword." [Matthew 26:52] Now what kind of a rebel commander is that? These Stage Four believers were in no mood to follow a failure.

We have to wonder: by now is there anyone left to follow our Savior? Any Stage Five followers out there? If there were any in the crowd that day, I can tell you that they weren't looking for a military leader or a prophet or a king. And they had long ago stopped searching for a Superhero. They would have had a pretty good idea of what was waiting for Jesus when he got to Jerusalem. They could find it in the Book of Isaiah:

He was despised and rejected by others;  
a man of suffering and acquainted with infirmity...  
he was wounded for our transgressions,  
crushed for our iniquities;  
upon him was the punishment that made us whole,  
and by his bruises we are healed. [53:3, 5]

If there were Stage Five followers of Jesus, I'd look for them among the women who travelled with him. After all, they were the only ones who didn't desert him. Everyone else was disappointed in him. He wasn't a Superhero. He didn't act like a Messianic King. He was too unpatriotic to be a Prophet. And he refused to play the part of violent revolutionary. Suffering Servant was the only role left to him and one that only the women could understand.

Because they were women, they already knew a lot about suffering, so they were able to hold together both the triumph of Palm Sunday and the tragedy of Good Friday. Because they were women and used to being out of control, they were able to live in that chaos between the cross and the empty tomb. Because they were mothers and had been so close to death in their own process of giving birth, they could understand how Jesus might choose to die so that others could live.

Because they stayed at the cross, the women got first row seats at Stage Six faith. We didn't talk about the final stage of faith development because James Fowler reserves that stage for martyrs and saints, those who are willing to lose their life for the sake of others. Most of us will never get there, but the promise of Palm Sunday and the gift of Good Friday is that we don't have to. Jesus got there first. While we were still living for ourselves, Jesus was dying for us, which is easy to say and almost impossible to understand. It's probably a good thing that we get to know Jesus in stages, because I doubt that we could take in that much truth, that much life, all at once.

So for those who are anxious to get life all figured out, it can feel like you are stuck at the back of a slow-moving parade right behind the horses. You have to be patient and you have to watch your step. But I promise that you will grow in faith as you get to know Jesus, in stages.