



Dr. James C. Howell
1 Samuel 8, Mark 15:1-32
April 5, 2009

The choir sang "Blessed Is He Who Came To Save Us," "Blessed Is He Who Came To Save Us." Blessed are we, for Christ came to save us.

I had some airplane time recently and got to read a couple of novels I might not have otherwise gotten around to. One was about the story of this Hebrew manuscript that was created hundreds of years ago and those who made it. Particularly, it was an illustrated manuscript that had passages from the Hebrew Scriptures. There were elegant paintings on the manuscript to illustrate what it was about. The turning point in the story really comes when someone takes a magnifying glass to one of those drawings and finds the signature of the artist, not visible to the naked eye. A magnifying glass required to see the signature of the artist. The second novel that I read was about a man whose wife died and who was alienated from his children and in order to escape the problems that he had in the real world, he simply escaped and became a medieval re-enactor. He got together with other people who pretended that they lived in the middle ages and dressed as people in the middle ages and ate what they ate and drank what they drank.

In some ways, in this coming week, you and I will become Biblical re-enactors. When you come to our services this week, nod with me now, you're coming, when you come to our services this week, we engage in a re-enactment. We re-enact the story of Jesus, the story on which the earth's history turned on its axis, the story that defines hope, truth, light and healing for all of us.

I returned yesterday from 13 days in the Holy Land with 40 folks from our church. It was a marvelous trip. We took the very route that Jesus took on Palm Sunday, coming down the Mount of Olives. Several times during the week, we stood on streets and on steps and in places where Jesus actually stood. It was so moving; it was a spiritual pilgrimage, not just sightseeing. And those of us who went, even though you did not ask us to go, we had a keen sense that we were there for you. We were there on your behalf, not instead of you, but in a way, representing all of us. We, as a church, were there. It was in the same way that when Jesus did what he did, it was not just for the people who happened to be there at that time, it was also for all of us who are here now.

Or maybe the way the Bible works is this: There was a man who went on the trip with us, and while we were away, he learned about the death of a lifelong friend. We got to the Charlotte airport yesterday and he pulled his cell phone out of his pocket, he suddenly had cell phone service again, and he was retrieving messages. One of the messages on his cell phone was from his lifelong friend who had called the day before he died to speak with his friend about the fact that he was dying, the voice of someone across space and time who has already died. This is what God's word is to us, those who have died, God's word across space and time.

When Jesus came into Jerusalem on that Palm Sunday, the crowds gathered around him, and they were all pumped and they were excited. They thought, "Finally the Messiah has come, the powerful one who will crush our foes whom we have loathed for so long." They misconstrued what Jesus' mission was about entirely. Their cries of Hosanna in a way echoed the story that Shane read to you from First Samuel, Chapter 8 when the people of Israel clamored around the prophet Samuel and said, "Let us have a king like all of the nations" and Samuel warns them what it's going to be like to have a king and says, "Oh, they'll take your sons and send them into battle to be killed and they'll take

your daughters to become slaves and they'll take your fields to use them for themselves. They'll take your tax money and engage in corporate bailouts" – No, wait, that's not in the Bible. He warns them about what it will be like to have a king, but the people say, "No, we will have a king, we want to be like the nations."

I would suggest to you that all of our problems at some point stem from our desire to be like something. There's some conformity that always we desire. We want to be like somebody else, we want to be like – I know when I was a little boy, the late 1960s, all the young guys were inexplicable. Young guys for awhile were wearing these pastel-covered Nehru jackets, just a fashion nightmare, but I wanted one. So I came to my mother and said, "I want one." She said, "Why?" I said "All the other boys have them." And she gave the proverbial maternal answer which is, "If all the other boys jumped off a cliff...", which she was right about the Nehru jacket, I'd like to point that out. We want to be like somebody.

Jesus did not come so that we could be conformists. Jesus did not come so we would have some dull conformity and be like everybody else in society...No, no, no, Jesus came so we could be different.

When I was in college, my roommate's girlfriend, she loved Jesus, and she wanted my roommate and me to love Jesus. And she cross-stitched this Bible verse and put it over the door to our dorm room. It's from Romans where Paul says, Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind." I mean, as a college guy, that's just what you want to see when you're going out at night. I mean, What could be more dull and conforming? The answer would be "the rest of your life." It's just what we do, we conform, we want to have what everyone else has. The advertisers, they've got their grip on us, they know that we're conformists. God came, Jesus came so that we could be transformed, changed into something more like God.

Jesus comes to Jerusalem among a throng of pilgrims. These people are spiritually hungry and many of them have come because they suffered much and were seeking healing. We know that Jesus healed some people, but let's be clear. Most people who were still around Jesus stayed sick. Most people still around Jesus continued their course toward death. There still was suffering and we wished that God had come down to rid our world of suffering, but He did not seem to do so, and there's listing on this in a book that's out now. I didn't read it for a long time until I lost count at 793 people who had asked me if I had read it. So finally, I turned to *The Shack* and I read *The Shack* and you're probably wondering what I think of *The Shack* and I was surprised, I have to tell you. It's got a lot of great theology in it. Now the truth is, it's the same theology I've been saying to you Sunday after Sunday after Sunday. It's the same theology that's in the Bible that's been right in front of your nose all your life. One of the best lines in *The Shack* really is this: Somebody is talking to the Jesus figure in the story, and he says to him, "But why do bad things happen? Can you justify evil?" And Jesus very wisely responds, "I did not come to justify evil, I came to redeem it." I did not come to justify evil, I came to redeem it. We ask why we suffer.

Jesus does not come to explain away suffering. He comes to redeem our suffering. The way that he did so is he, humbled and unarmed, gets on the back of, not a mighty war stallion but on a humble donkey, and he enters the city of Jerusalem, misunderstood by everybody around him. At that same time, Pontius Pilate was coming into Jerusalem to keep the peace during the Passover. He comes in with soldiers, the Roman legions, marching and they're brandishing their swords, their shields are clattering and their sandals in the dirt are clumping according to the rhythm. They come in with a great show of power. Jesus, as a contradictory expression of this, takes a different road into Jerusalem. That's the other great line in *The Shack*, by the way. It's at some point the Jesus' character is being

asked about other religions, and the question is posed, "Is it true that all roads lead to you?" Now, at that point, I expected Jesus in *The Shack* to say, "Yes, all roads lead to me." But that's not what he said, he said something much better, he said, "Oh no, it's not the case that all roads lead to me, but there is no road I won't take to find you." That's pitch-perfect. It is not the case that all roads lead to Jesus, and you know that. But there is no road Jesus won't take to find you. The road that Jesus took is that he laid down his life.

I don't know if you've noticed the new art that was donated to our church out there, just outside Jubilee Hall, two beautiful paintings that came from Russia. What is unusual about these paintings that you do not see very often is that Jesus is lying down. And I would suggest to you that that is theologically flawless. Because, why did Jesus come to Jerusalem on Palm Sunday? He came to, what? Lay down his life. If you think about lying down, what happens when you're lying down? You can't fight and defend yourself very well. You can't get up and run away very fast, you're lying down. When you're lying down, people can come out and step on you and do whatever they will to you. Jesus came to lay down his life. When you're lying down, if you open your eyes, you can't see what's all around you. What you can see is, you can see up. And that's where Jesus always looked. Jesus always looked up into Heaven, to God his Father. He did not take his quest from all that was around him, and he looked up into the Heavens, and he looked at the heart of God, his Father. He lay down, and when we lie down, there's some grief and sorrow attached to that, isn't it? Perhaps you loved someone and you've been with them when they were lying down and dying. You hold their hand, you cry, you whisper, "I love you." Perhaps you say a prayer and commend that person to God. And the fact is that for everyone in this room, at some point we, too, will lie down. Perhaps someone will be next to us and they will hold our hand and they will cry. They will whisper "I love you" in our ear and will say a prayer and commend us to God. There's a beauty in that because Jesus laid down his life for us.

While I was in Israel, I got an e-mail from a friend, and it included a quotation from St. Augusta where St. Augusta said that Jesus was beautiful in Heaven, Jesus was beautiful in his mother's womb, Jesus was beautiful in his mother's arms, Jesus was beautiful in his teaching, Jesus was beautiful in his healing, Jesus was beautiful when they scourged him, Jesus was beautiful as he hung on the cross, Jesus was beautiful in the tomb, Jesus was beautiful in his resurrection, Jesus was beautiful in Heaven.

In closing, I'll say this. I was trying to work on the sermon while I was traveling in Israel. At one point, we had a little lull in the action, and I pulled up my laptop and I was typing away there, and I got this brilliant idea. You'll have to trust me, it's vanished now, but at the time, it was a brilliant idea, and I couldn't wait to type it. So I started typing, and then somebody interrupted me, and I never got back to the brilliant thought. It started like this, it's still on the page here: As the church, we follow Christ even though we may misconstrue God, but the one thing we know is that we need...

Then I got interrupted. It was a stalwart thought and by the time I got back to it, I thought: The one thing is that we know that we need, the one thing we know is that we need...I just couldn't get it, and I kept looking at it on the screen: The one thing we know is that we need...the one thing we know is that we need. And I thought, well that's about right. The one thing we know is that we need – period. Maybe take a magnifying glass to look at that period. We see the signature of God Almighty, and that signature is the Cross, the humble Jesus who came to save us. We see the beauty. We know our need. We sense his love. We no longer wish to be conformist, but we are transformed by this one who came to save us.