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“Good Questions”

(Mark 11:1-10 NRSV) "When they were approaching Jerusalem, at Bethphage and Bethany, near the Mount of Olives, he sent two of his disciples 2 and said to them, "Go into the village ahead of you, and immediately as you enter it, you will find tied there a colt that has never been ridden; untie it and bring it. 3 If anyone says to you, 'Why are you doing this?' just say this, 'The Lord needs it and will send it back here immediately.'" 4 They went away and found a colt tied near a door, outside in the street. As they were untying it, 5 some of the bystanders said to them, "What are you doing, untying the colt?" 6 They told them what Jesus had said; and they allowed them to take it. 7 Then they brought the colt to Jesus and threw their cloaks on it; and he sat on it. 8 Many people spread their cloaks on the road, and others spread leafy branches that they had cut in the fields. 9 Then those who went ahead and those who followed were shouting, "Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! 10 Blessed is the coming kingdom of our ancestor David! Hosanna in the highest heaven!"

(Mark 14:17-20 NRSV) "When it was evening, he came with the twelve. 18 And when they had taken their places and were eating, Jesus said, "Truly I tell you, one of you will betray me, one who is eating with me." 19 They began to be distressed and to say to him one after another, "Surely, not I?" 20 He said to them, "It is one of the twelve, one who is dipping bread into the bowl with me."

(Luke 22:47-48 NRSV) "While he was still speaking, suddenly a crowd came, and the one called Judas, one of the twelve, was leading them. He approached Jesus to kiss him; 48 but Jesus said to him, "Judas, is it with a kiss that you are betraying the Son of Man?"

We cherish our Bibles because of the answers we have found in them. Many of you here, I suspect, have a favorite scripture that you keep close to your heart. In times of trial or hurt or grief we may go to those wonderful affirmations, those wonderful answers to our questions, that are found, for example, in John's Gospel: *"For God so loved the world...."* or *"In my Father's house there are many rooms."* I've known more than a few folks for whom that favorite verse, that favorite answer in times of trouble, is a line from the apostle Paul: *"I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me."* For some, including me, it is a verse that is at the very theological center of what the Gospel means, where Paul says in Romans: *"There is nothing in all creation that will*

separate you from the love of God through Jesus Christ.” But on this Palm Sunday morning, it’s not so much **answers** that I want to talk about but **questions**. Three good questions, to be precise. Three questions that are in the Bible’s accounts of this Holy Week, the last week of Jesus’ earthly life. The first is from the story of Palm Sunday and Jesus’ triumphal entry into Jerusalem. The second is a question on lips of Jesus’ disciples at the Last Supper. And the third is from Jesus Himself in the Garden of Gethemane at his betrayal. In this way, I want to suggest that we can also very profitably use scripture not so much as a **lens** by which we can see the answers more clearly, but also as a **mirror** through which the scripture can question us! And that’s a good thing, for sometimes a well-formed question can illumine and enlighten and challenge us even more than answers and affirmations. So let’s see how the story of Palm Sunday and Holy Week raise these three good questions of you and me.

Just before his entry into Jerusalem, did you hear how Jesus instructed his disciples to go into the city, to find a colt, to untie it, and to bring it to Jesus to ride upon? And the disciples go and do as they are told. The next step in the story is rather predictable, don’t you think? As they are untying the colt, the owner of it comes roaring out the door of his house saying *“What do you think you’re doing with my colt?!?”* Well, seems to be a reasonable question. Suppose you heard someone out rummaging in your garage one morning and then you watched as they hotwired your car, got in, and started down your driveway. And when you, rather understandably say, *“What are you doing!?!?”* (assuming you don’t say something stronger than this!), wouldn’t the answer that you get – the one that the disciples were told to give by Jesus – sound pretty lame to you? *“Our master has need of it.”* I suspect that you would not be impressed, and neither would I. But I don’t think our response would be, *“Well, ok then! Enjoy! Bring it back when you can.”*

And yet..... The very ludicrousness of this exchange is meant to be turned back on us, and the question becomes this one, aimed right at you and me: **“Where does God have need of us?”** For it is true, God needs you and of me. For God has a vision of a world that God hopes we would share and help with – a world where goodness overcomes evil, a world where hate does not win out over love, a world where equality and justice and wholeness and peace and plenty are the rule not the exception. *“If anyone says to you, ‘Why are you doing this?’ just say this, ‘The Lord needs it...’*” The ways that God has need of **us**, the questions that God poses to **us** about what kind of disciples we are, may well seem strange, and they certainly may even be unsettling sometimes. For we just might find that God needs us to witness to things we prefer not to, that even make us uncomfortable. We may find God wanting us to witness and work for justice when we’d rather settle for expediency; we may find that God needs us in order to remind folks that compassion is God’s plan not meanness or vengefulness. We may find that God is asking us to do something, has needs us to do something or share something, that stretches us in ways we don’t want to be stretched. In this Holy Week, therefore, I invite you to join me in asking: **“How does God have need of you?”**

There’s a second question that is raised in the scripture, spoken by the disciples, later in this week. It’s a harder question, a much more somber question. Did you hear it? Jesus and his disciples are celebrating the Passover, what has come down to us, of course, as His Last Supper. And at that meal, Jesus announces that one of those sitting there with him at that table will betray him. Imagine the awful emotion and consternation that runs around that table. But then the story records a curious turn, and offers our second curious question, for the story says that each of the disciples in turn says, *“Is it I, Lord? Is it I?”*

Once again, read literally and on the face of it, it seems a very strange question. For think about it: eleven of those men sitting there with Jesus **knew** that they were not the ones who had arranged to have Jesus handed over to the Roman army. So why would they have to ask, *“Is it I, Lord? Is it I?”* But let’s not read it too woodenly, for, just as with the first question, its very **strangeness** is a sign that it is perhaps a question also pointed at **us**. For this question runs deeper and wider than simply that of who bore the responsibility for Jesus’ arrest. Because when we unpack that question, *“Is it I?”* we find that it brings on other questions aimed at you and me: *“How have I betrayed you, Lord? How have I, in ways large or small, not lived up to the gospel that you have taught? How have I failed to reflect the truth of the good and gentle and just God whom You serve?”* You see, the question in this story is not just the historical question about who was responsible for Jesus’ arrest; no, the question is about who has failed God. And so again, seen in that way, this question is aimed right at you and me too. And we need to be honest: there **are** times we have failed God’s vision. Perhaps not in ways so dramatic as this occasion, but certainly in other ways: when we have turned away from those in need when something that we could do, or say, or something that we could give could have made a difference. When we have let our bigotry get the better of us. When we have chosen the easy and the hurtful when the good seemed too difficult. When we have laughed at a racist joke or stayed silent at bigoted pronouncement. When we have wrapped our own wants and wishes in the language of God’s wishes. *“Is it I, Lord? Is it I?”* Well, is it?

Later that evening, following that supper, we encounter the third question, this time on the lips of Jesus himself. Jesus and His disciples have gone to Gethsemane to pray – and the Roman soldiers come for Jesus. Now you have to imagine the scene: It is dark, the place is packed with people from all over Israel camping out while attending

the Passover festivities in Jerusalem. And the Roman soldiers have come, charged with arresting one particular Jewish man who, in the darkness, probably looks a lot like the hundreds of other Jewish men in that garden on that night. But Judas has arranged a sign so that the soldiers will know which man to arrest. He told them that he would greet Jesus with a kiss – a traditional greeting in that in that culture of one man greeting another, but also the traditional way a student acknowledges his rabbi. But Luke, alone among the gospels, records the scene in this way: Judas comes forth, the soldiers close behind him, and he approaches Jesus. But **before** Judas can touch him, Jesus holds him at arm's length and says, "*Judas, would you betray me with a kiss?*"

Another question. Another very good question. And once again, another question that also is aimed at us as well. For there are indeed times that you or I have disguised the less-than-good with the language of the good. There are times we have dressed up pomposity or hypocrisy or meanness in noble-sounding sentiments. There are times that – and we may not even know why we do this! – we use our relationships of affection as a disguise for hurting. Spouses have done it. Friends have done it. Siblings have done it. Under the guise of love – "*Judas, would you betray me with a kiss?*" – we have sometimes hurt one another. We have sinned. We have sometimes said "*I'm sorry*" when what we meant was "*I'm sorry that I got caught.*" We have said "*I'm only doing this for your own good*" to disguise something which was really for our good. And so Jesus' question to Judas is also to you and to me: when have **we** hurt one another and failed God even though we said that wasn't what we were doing, even though we dressed such hurtfulness in the language of care or even piety?

But that is not where I want to leave us this morning. For even as we know that the it will not be long before the triumph of Palm Sunday turns into the poignancy of the Last Supper, the betrayal in the Garden, and the crucifixion, we also know that God will

yet triumph. Now, that does not mean that we speed through the poignancy and the evil or overlook them; but it does mean that we experience that poignancy and evil always knowing nonetheless that God's love can and will overcome even those less-than-worthy answers to the questions that get pointed our way. In fact, we see this even in the events of Palm Sunday, a small line, a small question that gets posed that elicits a resounding answer from Jesus. So a final scripture this morning, one which I didn't print or have read this morning, is one which also has a question – and an answer that is for us and to us and to all the world. It's the scripture alluded to on your bulletin cover and it's from the gospel of Luke's telling of the story of Palm Sunday. For in Luke's telling of the story of Jesus being lauded and praised while entering Jerusalem, there occurs this wonderful exchange: *"Some of [those] in the crowd said to him, "Teacher, [won't you] order [them]to stop." He answered, "I tell you, if [they] were silent, the stones themselves would shout out."*

"[Won't you] order [them] to stop?" **No.** No. For the very creation itself is alive with the love of God, the persistence of God, the passion of God that every life be lived abundantly, purposively, blessedly, beautifully. Even the stones sing of it. And that is your job and my job this week, and every week: to be such stones. To be those ones who would sing out against the things that would do damage to God's reign of love, Christ's promise of grace for everyone. To be the stones that sing out wherever we encounter a life that needs encouragement. To be the stones that sing out whenever there is hope that needs a house. To be the stones that sing out in confidence and trust that even in the midst of death, even in the midst of disguise, even in the midst of life's hard questions, God's love through Jesus Christ will keep on singing, always and forever. Alleluia! Alleluia!

