Palm Sunday, March 24, 2002
WHO IS THIS?
Matthew 21:1-11

On the Christian calendar, this weekend we celebrate Palm Sunday. We recall the story of the entrance of Jesus into Jerusalem. Each of the four Gospels — Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John — has its own version of the Palm Sunday story in the New Testament. In overall substance, the stories are the same, yet they vary in details.

The fact is that we do not know very much about what actually happened on that day. We don't know if it was a major parade or a minor event. But the day was remembered by the early church and is remembered by the church today because it is the beginning of Holy Week. In the days following, we will remember the stories and events that are in direct contrast to this day of celebration. There will be stories of betrayal, denials, despair, hopelessness, and then a death on a cross, followed by the darkness of the tomb.

We tell these stories over and over again because they help us imagine something of the triumph and tragedy in our own lives. The church remembers these stories, not for the details but to remind us that God works through the ordinary events of life.

On Palm Sunday, we learn once more that the truth of God frequently arrives empty-handed, riding on a common animal. God's truth comes to you and me, not as a conquering hero or valiant warrior, but in gentleness and humility. We learn also that in every life, there will be joy, sorrow, betrayal, times of suffering, and times of celebration.

The early followers of Jesus remembered the story of Palm Sunday as told by Matthew's gospel for one more specific reason. The last sentence of the story says: "When Jesus entered Jerusalem, the whole city was in turmoil, asking, 'Who is this?'"

That question echoed through the centuries and continues to be asked today, and it's still causing turmoil. There are churches that become divided over the answer to this question. Creeds have been written and adopted in an attempt to answer that question and settle disputes. Who is this? Time and Newsweek often give Jesus their front-page cover in their Easter editions in alternating years in their attempt to answer this question. Preachers, biblical scholars, poets, and pundits offer their perspectives. Every year new books are written and published on this question: "Who is this man called Jesus?" In some churches, if your answer differs from the commonly accepted terminology, you are considered a heretic.

The New Testament is filled with a variety of metaphors in an attempt to answer this question. Jesus is called the "Lamb of God," "the bread of life," "the way, the truth, and the life," "teacher," "savior," "Messiah," "Son of God," "Son of Man," "the good shepherd," "the light of the world," "the Word made flesh," and many other names.

Individually and collectively, we try to answer the question concerning Jesus: Who is this? I've struggled with this question since childhood, and I'm still working on it. I'm sure that all of you are still struggling with it in one way or another. For some of you, your childhood image of Jesus is still with you. That image might be held with deep conviction, sometimes with warm personal devotion as expressed in hymns like "What a Friend We Have in Jesus" and "In the Garden," where "He walks with me and He talks with me; and He tells me I am His own." That's okay. I love those hymns too. One of my very favorite hymns is: "Precious Lord, take my

hand, lead me on, let me stand." I also love many other hymns that give a different picture of Jesus. I am convinced that there is no one hymn or one metaphor or one doctrine that by itself can adequately answer the question, "Who is this?"

There are those of you both within and outside the church whose childhood image of Jesus is now inadequate in your adult life. For some, it no longer makes a lot of sense, and for many of you, no persuasive alternative has replaced it. If you are in this category, this sermon is especially for you.

How you answer the question, "Who is this Jesus?" is important. It's important for two reasons. First, I am convinced that there is a strong connection between your image of Jesus and your idea of what it means to live a Christian life.

One commonly held image of Jesus is that of a divine figure whose mission consists primarily of believing the right doctrines and using the correct words to express those doctrines and beliefs. Frequently, these doctrines describe Jesus as the "divine savior" or "personal savior." His primary mission and purpose, in this view, was to die for the sins of the world and to bring you and others into eternal life. To be a Christian then, and to live a Christian life, is to believe these doctrines. Having the right doctrinal belief may, and ideally does, lead you to a life of service to others; however, believing — having the right faith — is where the emphasis is.

Another commonly held image of Jesus is that of a moral teacher. The focus is on ethical teachings, understood in general terms, such as the "great commandment" ("You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength, and you shall love your neighbor as yourself") and the "golden rule" ("Do unto others as you would have them do unto you"). Then living the Christian life consists primarily of "being good," of seeking to live as Jesus said we should.

Both of these images are important and have something to contribute to the question, "Who is this man called Jesus?" However, if these images are all that you have, they can lead to an incomplete image of what it means to live the Christian life. More is needed. Ultimately, the Christian life is more than believing and more than being good, as important as these two concepts are.

I said earlier that there is a second reason why the answer to the question of who this Jesus is important. That second reason is that there is a strong connection between your image of Jesus and your image of God. This should not surprise you because, above all, the life, teachings, death, and resurrection of Jesus are all messages about God.

Over and over again, Jesus is quoted in the New Testament as saying that he did not come among us to draw people to him but to point people to God. Another way to say it is: He came to bring you and me into a closer relationship with God and with each other. In Jesus, we see the mysterious and holy God focused in a human being. We see and experience in him the love of God made flesh. When people ask me, "What is God like?" My first answer is: look at Jesus. In a sermon on the last Sunday in January, I said that in Jesus, we see and know the "face of God."

Ultimately then, the message of Jesus is about your relationship with God and with others, and that involves you in a journey of transformation. That means learning to see God, other human beings, and all of God's creation in the way God intends. That leads to living life from a different perspective, an alternative way. It means that you cannot have a loving relationship

with God without having a loving relationship with other people. The New Testament puts it this way: “If anyone says they love God and hate another human being, that person is a liar.”

Harry Emerson Fosdick liked to say that “there are many ways in which the Christian faith can be described — in terms of its organizations, its theologies, its ethical principles — but it can also be thought of more simply as a way of looking at the world.”

Sometimes people will ask, “What does it mean to be religious?” Three answers are usually given: to participate in the rituals of a religious institution, to hold a particular set of theological beliefs, or to undergo characteristically religious experiences. But there is another answer to this question that is more accurate when talking about the Christian way of being religious. That answer is: to be religious in the Christian way is to see and live in the world in a different way.

Each one of you has an outlook on life. It may include God, or it may not. According to one poll, 90% of the people in this country say they believe in God. But no one ever asks them the important follow-up questions: “What kind of God do you believe in?” or “How does your faith in God affect your daily life? How does it affect the way you treat other human beings?” If you look at the way people live their lives, it indicates they do not understand God the way Jesus did. To understand God as Jesus did means to move beyond merely believing in God to being in relationship with God.

Here’s what I’m learning and continuing to learn about God from my study of the life of Jesus. More and more, I’m understanding that the word “God” refers to the sacred at the center of our existence. It is the holy mystery that is everywhere in creation, and that holy mystery is also a part of me and of each one of you. Each human being, as I’ve said many times before, is created in God’s image. That does not mean we always live up to that image. St. Paul said, “In God, we live and move and have our being.” God is more than everything, and yet everything is in God.

That’s what Jesus told people. He tried to help them change their way of looking at things, especially their way of understanding and relating to God and God’s creation. When a prospective follower came to Jesus, they were not asked to join a church or to subscribe to a formal creed. The person was asked to get a new way of seeing everything around them — a new way of understanding the Sabbath, a new way of understanding the Samaritans and other traditional enemies, a new way of seeing women, a new way of seeing sinners and those separated from society, a new way of seeing themselves. It’s no accident that the early followers of Jesus were called “Followers of the Way.”

It’s no wonder that when he entered Jerusalem, Matthew tells us the people were in turmoil. They sensed that he was calling into question their old ways of thinking and seeing the world and inviting them to something new. To use a biblical word, Jesus called upon people to “repent.” That word in the Greek language means literally, “change your mind,” “to come to a new way of thinking and seeing.”

Seeing God and others the way Jesus asks us to see them can put you and me into turmoil. It makes all the difference in the world. If, for example, it is your practice to see all or most human beings as your potential enemy, as people who cannot be trusted, then you will behave one way toward others. If, on the other hand, you see all people as being created in God’s image and, therefore, as your sisters and brothers who can be trusted and loved, as potential friends, then you will treat others in a different way. Thus, when a person becomes a follower

of the way of Jesus, it means you have to withdraw or change your old way of looking at people and the world.

Thus, Jesus said, “You have heard that it was said of old, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you, ‘Love your enemies.'”

Here’s another example: “Get a new way of looking at money,” said Jesus. “Take heed and beware of covetousness; for a person’s life does not consist in the abundance of things they own.” The culture around us says to get as much as possible and hold on to it. But Jesus said, “Learn to let go. Learn to give. Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth where moth and rust consume, and where thieves break in and steal. But lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal.”

This new way of seeing things includes all of creation. God made the creation good, and God is still creating. The creation is not a vast blind mechanism crashing ruthlessly on with no overall purpose or direction. The creation is being held by a purposeful God, infused with God’s loving energy, with intelligent meaning, and with moral intent. It’s still very mysterious. Einstein liked to say, “Subtle is the Lord, but capricious He is not.”

This new way of seeing God and God’s creation is to understand all of creation as being connected and working ultimately in harmony. Too often we tend to see things only in bits and pieces and never try to put the whole picture together.

Who is this Jesus? I invite you to continue to struggle with this question as I will do. Remember that no one answer is ever complete in itself. And remember above all that ultimately the message of Jesus is a message about God. It’s about an alternative way of being in relationship with God and with others. Amen.