

John 12:12-16

A Picture's Worth a Thousand Words

Hi, I'm Mary. Lately I've been thinking a lot about why our Jewish religious leaders are so riled up about my dear friend Jesus. He's always been there to save me and my family . . . and so many others, too.

Why are our leaders constantly attacking him? I don't know if any explanation will satisfy me.

Sure, he threatens their power and place in society— but here's what I've come to. I think, more than anything else, the Pharisees just can't take it in— that Jesus is the world's long-awaited Messiah.

If they were convinced he's the Messiah, they would forget / every other grievance they have against him. Instead, they come to the easy conclusion—the one based on what they *already believe*, the one born of group-think . . . they're confident he's simply another charlatan, someone trying to pull the wool over the eyes of all God's people. In their own words, he's a heretic, a *dangerous* heretic.

They don't believe his claim, because what he looks like, what he says and does, doesn't jibe with the Messiah picture they have in their heads.

Sure, the Pharisees concede that Jesus is a miracleworker. After all, they've seen the miracles he's performed almost daily, including raising my brother Lazarus from stone-cold death.

But miracleworker isn't the same thing as "son of God." There's only one of those, and no one's laid eyes on him yet, they believe.

I knew where he was headed when he left Bethany a week or two after the burial cloths dropped from Lazarus. He was headed to the Passover celebration at the place where every Jew wants to celebrate Passover, Jerusalem. In reality, he'd been headed to the Holy City his whole life.

The city had welcomed hundreds of thousands of Jewish pilgrims for the feast already and was pulsing with excitement. On top of that, it seems like the whole city had caught the buzz— ranging from asking each other, "Surely he won't come to the festival, will he?" to "He's here! I heard he's here! Have you seen him?"

Then you'll remember the reception Jesus received when he finally did enter the city. It's been told many times over like this:

[John 12:12-19]

"Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord—the King of Israel!" they shouted. But this king was riding on a donkey's colt.

William Barclay explains that "A king came riding upon a horse when he was intent on war; he came riding upon a donkey when he was coming in peace." That's because a king intent on war and riding a stallion was what Roman rulers looked like. That sense of

superiority and power, the look of a conqueror—that is what it took for successful Roman rule.

Roman rulers didn't ride on donkeys. Others might, but not kings of the dominant power in the world.

Jesus had no image to maintain, but he did have a message to convey. He knew what the crowds were expecting in a king, but he would have a hard time making himself understood here.

He couldn't stand on the lakeshore as he had before, and explain what he was doing. He couldn't speak to the crowds with the help of the topography and its enhanced acoustics. There were too many people, too much of a crush, too much shouting.

He knew his point would have to be made visually. A picture is worth a thousand words, you know. So, fulfilling prophecy, Jesus found a young donkey and rode into Jerusalem on it.

Riding a donkey, as Zechariah the prophet wrote, indicated that he was the Jewish king. Riding a donkey also said that this king was humble and peaceable, unlike a Roman king. A king who is humble and peaceable—the two notions aren't exclusionary in Jesus.

Under this new covenant Jesus is establishing, they will both be true. The world had never seen anything like it before.

A picture is worth a thousand words. This week I saw a picture of a man waiting in line with his wife to order coffee. Slung across his back was an assault rifle with 20 or 30 rounds of ammunition in it.

Picture it. You're sitting in Starbucks and in walks a man with an assault rifle. What does that picture say to you?

Some of us would immediately react out of fear, our pulses quickening. We might quickly drain our coffee and leave. Others, I assume, would respond with pride. Most of us would have instantaneous, judgmental reactions toward the man: He's either a bone-head or a proud warrior, seldom anything between.

The judgement comes out of our preconceived ideas, our prejudices. In the moment, we're not thinking anything through, mulling over the more complex questions surrounding what we see.

Let me ask you a question. When we think about "just power" or power that seeks justice, what picture comes to mind? A million different images will come to a million different people.

But when we see, as we did a couple of years ago, a man with an assault weapon standing at the entrance of Gathering Place park in Tulsa—believing he's acting out of just power— it is simpler. Our reactions will likely come from either one ethical camp or the other, both of which have political labels slapped on them.

Right or wrong, true or false, beautiful or ugly, red or blue. We've long thought this way of thinking, this oppositional or at least binary way of thinking, is typical of Western thought. We've thought its origins are Greek. The implication is that "we" should strive to avoid being trapped by such oppositions.

The fact is that there is more diversity in the West than we think. And it has overlapped with so many other parts of the world for so long, that we don't know where "the West" starts and the other picks up.

Tufts Professor Peter Levine says the West has not been consistently dualistic. He goes on:

"Christianity is surely a Western phenomenon, and a core Christian idea is that Jesus is *both* divine and human, *both* a person and one with the persons of God and the Holy Spirit." Jesus defies stereotypes in his very nature!

Another orthodox Christian assumption is that God created nature/the world, yet the world is not synonymous with God.

For Christians it's always been more complicated than the picture we see at first glance. In fact, many thinkers who have been formally condemned as heretics by Christianity, have been *banned* for adopting dualistic views either of Christ or nature.

Not only does Jesus take to himself our sin in his body on the cross, he also ***defies stereotypes in his own body***. . . . and he calls us to follow.

What does that look like for us? I was drawn to an opinion piece in the Tulsa World last week that began with a quote from President Abraham Lincoln at his first inaugural address. He was speaking to a divided country: Union/Confederate, North/South. He said:

“We are not enemies, but friends. We must not be enemies. Though passion may have strained, it must not break our bonds of affection.”

The author of the opinion article, Barbara Prose a pastor from All Souls Unitarian Church says that, like most of us, she used to stereotype, feel superior to, dismiss and ridicule people on “the other side” of the political divide. Then she reached out to an organization called Braver Angels to find a new way forward.

She wanted to stop contributing to the daily divisive and distracting rhetoric and instead start learning how to better communicate with people with whom she disagrees on policy decisions but often agrees with on core values. I’ve heard of individual churches who do something like this to strengthen their own life together.

The workshops sponsored by Braver Angels start with a self assessment that asks participants to respond to six questions, all of which can be answered by Often/Sometimes/Never. As I read these questions aloud, I encourage you to consider how you would answer them:

1. How often do you find yourself thinking about “those people” on the other side of the political side without much regard for the variation among them? (Usually we’re aware of great variation within our own group.)
2. How often do you find yourself assigning mainly self-serving or negative motives to the other group—and mainly positive motives to your group?

3. How often do you find yourself focusing on the most extreme or outrageous ideas and people, on the other side, thereby making it hard to see how a reasonable person could remain in that group?
4. How often do you find yourself comparing the worst people on the other side with the best people on your side?
5. How often do you feel a “rush” of pleasure with friends when you ridicule those crazies on the other political side?
6. Which of the following is closest to your overall emotional attitude toward the majority of people who support the other side?
 - **Hate:** They are enemies out to destroy the country
 - **Disdain:** They are ignorant and should know better
 - **Pity:** They are well meaning, but duped
 - **Basic Respect:** They make contributions, even if they are mostly off base
 - **Respect and Appreciation:** They make unique and necessary contributions to the whole

Braver Angels posts that “At this time of crisis, we need more than civility, empathy, and goodwill. We need courage.” And I would add that for Christians that courage comes from / having in us / the same Christ Jesus, at once divine and human, who courageously rode into Jerusalem, an eternal king on a donkey.

His act of even entering the Holy City where excitement and tension were running high—even stepping foot into Jerusalem was an act of

the greatest courage . . . he knew what his enemies were capable of doing.

At the same time, though—and this we must not miss— his entrance was an act of the greatest love, because as William Barclay put it: “It was love’s last appeal before the end.”

Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem is not just a caricature of a story we tell every year, but it is THE STORY—and in it is ALL TRUTH. It is not a myth to take or leave, but a part of the one true story out of which we understand our lives.

Being courageous in the face of menacing physical threat, working to really hear and value people beyond stereotypes, and doing it all out of Christ’s love in us . . . that’s what makes us Christians who we are.

Do you hear the summons? Jesus calls us to follow him all the way to the cross.