

Who Is This?

There are multiple issues we could explore after reading Matthew's account of Jesus riding into Jerusalem.¹ For example, verse 7 reports "They brought the donkey and the colt and laid their clothes on them. Then he sat on them." Does he sit on the donkey and colt at the same time? Or does he take turns riding the donkey for awhile and then switching to the colt? Or does the word "them" refer to the clothes? Whatever the case, it seems a long way to go to fulfill a prophetic prediction.

We could spend time considering the word "hosanna." We've come to think of it as an expression of praise, like "hallelujah." But "hosanna" is better translated as "save us." What were the people expecting Jesus to save them from? How were they expecting him to do it? Was there more danger from outside forces – oppression, poverty, disrespect, dismissal? Or was there more danger from the forces within every human – jealousy, greed, victimhood, negative self-talk, fear?

Another option would be to talk about the people in the crowd. How much courage did it take them to join this procession – for all appearances a parody of Roman victory processions? It's quite possible that Pilate and his armies were entering Jerusalem at the same time through a different gate. Wouldn't it be safer to join that cheering throng instead of this one?

Perhaps we should have read through verse 17 instead of stopping at verse 11. There we see Jesus driving buyers and sellers out of the temple and welcoming in those who are usually excluded from it. Was this act the tipping point for the religious and political leaders who wanted to maintain the status quo and prevent anything that could arouse the attention and ire of Rome? How could they stop this man who ignored and even blatantly disobeyed the laws of God passed down through generations? Would the Roman governor view Jesus' growing popularity as a threat and oppress the Jewish people even more than was happening already?

We could spend time with any of these options, but the question that piqued my interest this week is found in verse 10: *And when Jesus entered Jerusalem, the whole city was stirred up. "Who is this?" they asked.*² The answer, *It's the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee,*³ also caught my attention. It's interesting that they identified Jesus as a prophet. They didn't say he was God's son as the centurion and those with him would confess after the crucifixion.⁴

Who is this? Who is Jesus? This may be the most important question of our Christian faith. It's a question we've touched on as we've read stories from the Gospel of John. In these accounts Jesus encountered a variety of individuals who tried to figure out who he was and what he was doing. Some were fascinated. *Who are you?* Some were confused. *Who are you?* Some are outraged. *Who are you?*

I admit that these responses mirror my own. I'm fascinated by Jesus. I've been hearing and reading about him my entire life. I've been teaching and preaching about him for several decades. And I continue to enjoy listening, reading, learning, and teaching.

I don't recall being outraged very often. I'd like to think I'm outraged with Jesus – angry at and working against the injustices, hypocrisies, and wrongs he railed against. But more likely, I'm

¹ Matthew 21:1-11

² Matthew 21:10, *Common English Bible*

³ Matthew 21:11, *Common English Bible*

⁴ Matthew 27:54

angry because of Jesus; because his words, actions, and attitudes expose my complacency and shortcomings.

Even now, sometimes I'm confused about Jesus. Some of the questions I have are ones a "good" pastor shouldn't admit to having. What exactly were the circumstances of his birth? How could he be fully human and human divine? Which of the multiple theories of atonement, each with a basis in scripture, is accurate? I'm convinced I can continue to wrestle with these and other questions and still be a "good" pastor.

Returning to the question. Who is Jesus? Let's look at seven "I am" statements found in the Gospel of John. I won't be able to talk about each of these in-depth. Each one could be the basis for an entire sermon, or maybe even a series of sermons. I'll read the statements, offer a bit of commentary, and invite you to ponder what they mean for you.⁵

I am the bread of life. *Whoever comes to me will never go hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty. I am the living bread that came down from heaven.*⁶

Jesus said this shortly after he had fed a crowd of more than five thousand people. As the crowd followed him, wanting more food, Jesus pointed out that physical food only satisfies hunger temporarily, but he provides a way to satisfy them spiritually.

The people were familiar with the story of God providing manna to the Israelites in the wilderness. But that bread satisfied temporary hunger and those who ate it eventually died. Jesus provides the bread of life, of spiritual life.

Jesus knows the importance of our spiritual life. Jesus shows us how to feed our spiritual hunger. Jesus satisfies our hunger for God now and promises future blessing in the life that comes next.

I am the light of the world. *Whoever follows me won't walk in darkness but will have the light of life.*⁷

Jesus made this statement just after forgiving, rather than condemning, a woman caught in adultery whom the Pharisees brought before him while he was teaching in the temple. He repeated this declaration right before a man born blind received his sight.

The reference to light connects with the Jewish Feast of Tabernacles. At this feast, a huge candelabra was lit in the women's court of the temple. It reminded the Israelites of the pillar of fire that guided their ancestors during their wilderness wanderings.

It's possible to live a complete and fulfilled life without physical sight. Jesus helps us to see, to realize, what really matters. He helps us to focus on the spiritual rather than the material. Jesus, the light, guides us as we pursue justice, love our neighbors, and walk humbly with God.

I am the gate. *Whoever enters through me will be saved. They will come in and go out and find pasture. The thief enters only to steal, kill, and destroy. I came so that they could have life—indeed, so that they could live life to the fullest.*⁸

Jesus made this statement during a discourse in which he implied that many of Israel's religious leaders were unfit shepherds of the nation. In contrast, Jesus demonstrated care and devotion to his followers.

His listeners were confused by his words, but they were familiar with shepherds and sheep. Shepherds guided their flocks into stone enclosures for protection at night. These structures didn't

⁵ Comments drawn from Willard M. Swartley, *BCBC: John*, Herald Press, 2013, and [The 7 "I AM" Statements of Jesus Explained \(crosswalk.com\)](#).

⁶ John 6:35, 51a, *Common English Bible*

⁷ John 8:12, (9:5), *Common English Bible*

⁸ John 10:9-10, *Common English Bible*

have doors so the shepherd would sit or lie in the opening to prevent predators from attacking the sheep.

Jesus describes how to be a true leader – one who protects those for whom they have responsibility, who looks out for their best interests and safety. Good leaders tend their flock with compassion. They don't flaunt their power over them and exploit them.

I am the good shepherd. *The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. When the hired hand sees the wolf coming, he leaves the sheep and runs away. That's because he isn't the shepherd; the sheep aren't really his. So the wolf attacks the sheep and scatters them. He's only a hired hand and the sheep don't matter to him.*

I am the good shepherd. *I know my own sheep and they know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father. I give up my life for the sheep. I have other sheep that don't belong to this sheep pen. I must lead them too. They will listen to my voice and there will be one flock, with one shepherd.*⁹

In these statements, Jesus continued describing his relationship with the people and with God. He continued to contrast good leadership with poor. A true leader makes sacrifices for the good of the group; a false leader is most concerned about self-protection.

Jesus is a life-giver, offering abundant life, rather than a life-stealer, taking for himself. Because of this we willingly give him our devotion and follow his guidance. What Jesus says resonates with us. We listen, follow, and belong.

Jesus knows us intimately, calling us by name. Because of Jesus, we are part of a community that can fill our need for connection, if we allow it. Because of Jesus, there is no in-group and out-group; outsiders become insiders and strangers become friends.

I am the resurrection and the life. *Whoever believes in me will live, even though they die.*¹⁰

We heard these words last week, when Jesus spoke to his grieving friend, Martha, after her brother, Lazarus, had died. Death brought a sense of despair, hopelessness, and finality until Jesus spoke those words, and then demonstrated them by bringing his dead friend back to life.

Jesus has sovereignty over death. Because of Jesus, death has lost its power. Eternal life, abundant life, is available now and in the life to come. Physical death doesn't end the gift of life.

I am the way, the truth, and the life. *No one comes to the Father except through me.*¹¹

This statement is part the long discussion – actually, more of a lengthy sermon and prayer – Jesus had with his disciples after washing their feet and before his arrest. When the disciples were confused by Jesus's statements about preparing a place for them, Thomas asked what all of them must have been thinking: "Lord, we do not know where You are going, and how can we know the way?"¹² In response, Jesus declared that he is the way, the truth, and the life.

Jesus prepares a place for us and shows us the way. Jesus as the way and truth gives us life. To know Jesus is to know God. As Christians, as followers of Jesus, this is what we believe. It's possible to be firm in this belief and yet respect those with different beliefs.

Quoting Willard Swartley, author of the *Believers Church Bible Commentary* on John, "Jesus defines himself as the access route to God, the Father, contrasting himself to the false shepherds in John 10. Believers through the ages know and value this truth. At the same time, we must be careful not to use this text to club other religions. Rather, we bear testimony to Jesus as truth in our Christian experience. We value noble ethical insights of other religions and affirm those devout in their faith (Jewish, Muslim, Hindu, and others). This does not mean compromising our

⁹ John 10:11-16, *Common English Bible*

¹⁰ John 11:25, *Common English Bible*

¹¹ John 14:6, *Common English Bible*

¹² John 14:5, *Common English Bible*

beliefs. Rather, witness to Jesus as way, truth, and life for Christians is essential to honest interreligious dialogue.”¹³

***I am the true vine**, and my Father is the vineyard keeper. He removes any of my branches that don't produce fruit, and he trims any branch that produces fruit so that it will produce even more fruit. You are already trimmed because of the word I have spoken to you. Remain in me, and I will remain in you. A branch can't produce fruit by itself, but must remain in the vine. Likewise, you can't produce fruit unless you remain in me.*

***I am the vine**; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, then you will produce much fruit. Without me, you can't do anything.*¹⁴

These words are also part of Jesus' long discourse in the upper room on the night of his arrest and impending death. The images of vine, branches, fruit, and gardener were familiar to his disciples. They knew the importance of pruning and remaining connected to the source of water and nutrients. As the true vine, Jesus was the source of life for his disciples. “As the branch depends upon the vine to live and bear fruit, so disciples must abide in Jesus to live and bear fruit, especially in a hostile world.”¹⁵

By abiding in or dwelling with or attaching ourselves to Christ, we enable his life to flow in and through us. Then we cannot help but bear fruit that will honor God. As we allow God to nurture, tend, and prune, we can grow to our potential and bear much fruit.

As branches on the same vine, we are inter-dependent, receiving and giving support, staying, remaining together, committed and connected to each other and to God.

Through these seven “I am” statements and other declarations throughout the Gospel of John, Jesus connected himself to God who interacted with Moses in the third chapter of Exodus.

But Moses said to God, “If I now come to the Israelites and say to them, ‘The God of your ancestors has sent me to you,’ they are going to ask me, ‘What’s this God’s name?’ What am I supposed to say to them?”

*God said to Moses, “I Am Who I Am. So say to the Israelites, ‘I Am has sent me to you.’” God continued, “Say to the Israelites, ‘The LORD, the God of your ancestors, Abraham’s God, Isaac’s God, and Jacob’s God, has sent me to you.’ This is my name forever; this is how all generations will remember me.*¹⁶

What God is, Jesus is. What God does, Jesus does. Looking at these self-descriptions helps us feel the power and danger of the questions of Jesus' identity. They help us understand the crisis of Holy Week and prepare us for both the crucifixion and the resurrection.

Who is Jesus? Jesus is the bread of life, the light of the world, the gate, the good shepherd, the resurrection, the way, the truth, the life, and the true vine. Jesus nourishes us, satisfies us, blesses us, helps us to see, protects us, cares for us, sacrifices for us, knows us, calls us by name, gives us life, shows us the way, abides with us, and remains with us.

This is who we follow. This is who brings us together. Thanks be to God.

¹³ Swartley, p. 354.

¹⁴ John 15:1-5, *Common English Bible*

¹⁵ Swartley, p. 359.

¹⁶ Exodus 3:13-15, *Common English Bible*