

DREAMS AND DISRUPTIONS

PALM SUNDAY



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John 12:12-15
Psalm Sunday Message
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How many of you have heard of the term “the Rashomon effect”? It comes from a 1950 Japanese film and refers to the idea that when multiple people see the same thing, they don’t always actually see the same thing. We can be looking at something identical and have completely different interpretations of the set of events.

There is an Easter-themed example. Some people see a duck; others see a rabbit. Or maybe you remember the dress that broke the internet in 2015. A huge battle raged online as to what color you see when you look at this dress. Some people see white and gold while others see blue and black.

The simple truth is that we do not all see the same things in the same way. That is the Rashomon effect. It is particularly powerful in storytelling.

Today is Palm Sunday; one week before Easter. On this day, we usually tell a certain story. A carpenter’s son from Nazareth entered the city of Jerusalem on a borrowed donkey. Those are the facts of the story. But the many people who were there on that day each perceived the event in a different way—one event, a moment in time. We will see how that day brought a variety of responses. Among them were dreams and disruptions.

Last week we finished a series going through the book of Ephesians. One of the prominent themes in that book was the unity that Jesus Christ established in a community of very different people. In particular, two different ethnic groups with a thousand-year history of hatred and violence were knit together by the work of Christ into a single body of people. How is it possible to overcome that kind of hostility and find peace?

We might find some answers as we look at the Palm Sunday story. This morning, we will look at this event from two different perspectives. I’m going to introduce you to a Jew named Yosef and a Roman Gentile named Marius. We’ll see how these two men perceive the entrance of a Nazarene carpenter into the holy city of

Jerusalem. By seeing the event through their eyes, we might gain a deeper understanding of how Jesus brings people together.

Those two individuals are not the only characters we will consider. I will also invite you to put yourself in the moment as well. We are talking about an event that happened two thousand years ago, and yet we still tell the story today. How do you experience these events? What could they mean to you?

Background

This story is told in all four gospels. This morning we will look at the account recorded in the gospel of John. I will read it in a few minutes. But before I do, it is helpful to understand what happened immediately prior, according to John. It’s a fascinating series of events with a host of different characters involved. Some of you may be familiar with these stories. Don’t worry if you are not—I think you will still understand the main point.

In the previous chapter, we are told of Jesus travelling to a village called Bethany—about two miles away from Jerusalem—where a good friend of his recently died suddenly. Jesus shocked everyone by raising his friend Lazarus from the dead. While many people celebrated that miracle, the religious leaders saw Jesus as a threat and began to form a plot to have him killed.

The next thing that happens in John’s narrative is that Jesus returns to Bethany. He attends a dinner party where Mary, the brother of Lazarus, anoints Jesus with very expensive perfume. One of his disciples, named Judas, was upset because he could have sold that perfume for a lot of money, and he had a habit of skimming funds from Jesus’ account. Mary’s extravagance also upset the Pharisees even more, and they add Lazarus to their list of people to make disappear.

Before we get to the events of this morning, think about all the different reactions toward Jesus we have already seen. Lazarus was excited to be alive. His sister was grateful to have her brother back. The disciples and

the crowds were stunned that Jesus could raise someone from the dead. Judas was grumpy and greedy. The Pharisees were angry and murderous.

All of that was happening, but we will zoom in on two people as we watch Jesus enter Jerusalem.

Yosef is a young man from a village in the north of Israel called Nain. He's come to Jerusalem for the yearly celebration of Passover. Marius was born on the island of Cyprus but had been living in Jerusalem for the last two years. Yosef is standing outside the city gates. Marius sits upstairs in a house on the city wall watching from a window. Yosef has walked a long way to be here: he is tired and hungry. Marius lives nearby. Beside him is a plate of bread and a glass of wine.

What happens as these two young men watch is recorded in John 12:12-15:

The next day the large crowd that had come to the feast heard that Jesus was coming to Jerusalem. 13 So they took branches of palm trees and went out to meet him, crying out, "Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord, even the King of Israel!" 14 And Jesus found a young donkey and sat on it, just as it is written,

15 "Fear not, daughter of Zion; behold, your king is coming, sitting on a donkey's colt!"

One event. Two different perspectives. Let's dive a little deeper into each of our spectators to understand what they might be seeing.

Dreams Fulfilled

Most of Yosef's family came with him to Jerusalem. They didn't come out to see the carpenter's son from Nazareth because they were tired from the journey. But everybody has been talking about Jesus, and Yosef wants to see him. A few years ago, he had come to Yosef's village. What a day that had been. One of Yosef's childhood friends, Reuben, had died from an illness. But in the middle of the funeral procession, Jesus appeared and told Reuben to get up. And he did! (Luke 7:11-15).

The whole town was in an uproar. Everyone was so excited. The people started talking as if Jesus were the Promised One. They thought things might finally

change. But of course, they didn't. A few weeks later, the Roman tax collectors came through the village. Life was back to normal.

Yosef had seen his father demoralized by the Roman taxes for all of his life. They were nearly impossible to pay. His family would have a good harvest and think things would be easier for a while. And then the taxes would be increased, and they could barely survive once again.

Ever since Yosef's brother Tobiah disappeared, his father seemed to have lost all joy. Yosef was four years old the last time he saw his brother. They never speak of him. It happened during a tough year for the whole village. His friends whisper that Tobiah was taken into slavery by the Romans because of his father's debt.

Now Yosef has his wife, and she is expecting a baby. He desperately wants to create a better life for his new family. His family had passed down the stories from a hundred years ago of what Israel was like before the Romans came. That was when hard work paid off and when you could make a living and worship in peace.

Every morning, Yosef prays the Shema as he wakes up. "Hear, O Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord is one." Lately, he's been holding onto the words from the prophet Isaiah:

It shall come to pass in the latter days
that the mountain of the house of the Lord
shall be established as the highest of the mountains,
and shall be lifted up above the hills;
and all the nations shall flow to it,
3 and many peoples shall come, and say:
"Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord,
to the house of the God of Jacob,
that he may teach us his ways
and that we may walk in his paths." (Isaiah 2:2-3a)

Some people are saying that these are the latter days. Some people are saying that the time of the Romans is over. That's why Yosef wanted to come to see Jesus. He heard that Jesus raised someone else from the dead over in Bethany. He wonders if Jesus might be the one who will establish the house of the Lord as the highest of the mountains.

Yosef has been waiting a long time. His family has been waiting a long time. Maybe this is the last year they would have to pay the Roman taxes. Maybe, the dark mood in his village would finally be lifted. Maybe

his child could grow up without the fear of being taken as a Roman slave. Perhaps, his time had finally come.

Yosef thought that Jesus could fulfill his dreams. So when Jesus walked by, he waved the branch that someone had given him. Yosef had never been so excited. At the top of his voice, he yelled, “Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord, even the King of Israel.” As Jesus passed, he made eye contact with Yosef, and it looked like he recognized him. Is it possible that he could have remembered him from two years ago back in his village? He hadn’t even spoken to him back then. But there was recognition in Jesus’ eyes.

Maybe Yosef’s dreams would be fulfilled. Maybe, his time had finally come.

Disruption feared

Marius sat at an upper room window on the other side of the city walls. He feels out of place in Jerusalem. It seems strange here. He misses the island culture of Cyprus. He misses being in a proper outpost of the Empire. Jerusalem doesn’t even have a bathhouse. The Jews would never allow it.

Marius’s father started as an exporter. Everyone in the Empire loves the olive oil from Cyprus. His father would sell to the wealthy elite. He had an eye for business, which eventually led to an invitation to manage one of Herod’s households. It meant they had to leave their home, but they hoped it could eventually pay off.

Marius wanted to make it big. Maybe one day, he would get to live in the center of the world. Maybe one day, he would make it to Rome. He could serve in one of the estates of the wealthy patrons. That would be the life. He just needed to get noticed, and he would have his break.

His father sent him down to the city walls to see about this man from the high country. He forgot his name. All he knew was this man could be a problem. If the man disrupted the peace, that would ruin everything. If there were one more major uprising in Jerusalem, the emperor would be mad. Herod would be punished, and any hope for Marius and his father would be destroyed.

Marius’ worst thing that could happen would be that his life was thrown off track. He had everything planned out. But it was so fragile. Conspiracy, war, battle, famine, insurrection—any of that could bring the whole

thing tumbling down. The slightest turn of events could become a major disruption.

The crowd was making noise now. This must be the man. He is riding on a donkey. Everyone is going crazy. It is almost like they are worshipping him. Above the road, he can hear the words “King of Israel.” Those are dangerous words to be saying. Marius has to put a stop to this.

As he watches the proceedings, it seems like Jesus looks up at him. He is pretty far away, but it feels like Jesus is making eye contact with him. He gives a slight nod as if he recognizes Marius. That is impossible. He has never seen him before. Still, it seems as if Jesus somehow knows him. It makes him think about the Jews in their Temple—how focused and confident they seem that there is a god in heaven who cares for them.

Marius breaks eye contact. That’s just superstition. The only god who matters sits on a throne in Rome, not in heaven.

Marius thinks again about raising the alarm about how dangerous this man is. Maybe that is how he, Marius, could be noticed. He would undoubtedly be noticed if he could stop this man and ensure that the peace was maintained. That could be his big ticket. Maybe he would finally have the life he always wanted.

Maybe his time had finally come. Perhaps he could prevent the disruption.

What about us?

Yosef and Marius watched the same events in process. A carpenter’s son from Nazareth entered the city of Jerusalem on a borrowed donkey. Each of them wanted something. Yosef wanted this man to do something. Marius wanted to prevent this man from doing something. Yosef had dreams. Marius feared disruption.

Each of them saw an opportunity. Each of them hoped that their time had come. What about us?

Some of us are like Yosef. We feel like our lives are full of problems. We feel we can’t quite get things to work the way we want them to. Every time we get close, something else happens to knock us back down a notch. We dream of a time when things could be better—when we get the job, find a spouse, buy a house, or beat the illness. Those are our dreams.

Maybe we hope that Jesus can fulfill our dreams.

Others of us might be more like Marius. Things in our life are okay for us, for the most part. The job is good. The family is stable enough. Life is relatively smooth. The last thing we want is for Jesus to get in the way. To shake things up. Make us feel like we need to give more or serve more or change how we live. Going to church is fine—I can handle that. But Jesus had better stay out of the other parts of my life.

Maybe we're afraid at times that Jesus could bring disruption.

Yosef and Marius thought their time had come. What will it look like for your time to come?

Five times in the book of John, we hear that Jesus' time had not yet come— when he turned water into wine, when he travelled in Galilee, and even the last time he was in Jerusalem. But immediately after coming into the city, we read this:

John 12:23:

And Jesus answered them, “The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified.”

The hour had finally come for the Son of Man to be glorified.

But the events that were about to unfold in the coming week would not typically qualify as glorious. Jesus would pray so fervently that blood would drop from his sweat glands. At his final meal, one of his closest friends would betray him. He would be arrested. All of his close companions would desert him. He would be mocked. Humiliated. Tortured. Publicly shamed and executed.

This was what it looked like for the Son of Man to be glorified. The people who yelled “Hosanna” as he came into the city would shout, “Crucify him” days later.

This is the paradox of following Jesus. He does fulfill the dreams of Yosef. Not by defeating the Romans and giving him a comfortable life with reasonable government taxation. Jesus fulfills the dreams that Yosef did not even know that he had: an eternal life of forgiveness and peace.

Jesus does disrupt the peace that Marius holds onto so tightly. But he does it out of mercy and love. Jesus

does it so that Marius can experience life as a servant of the Most High God instead of the Emperor of Rome. He would serve in royal courts, but they would be heavenly instead of earthly.

Yosef and Marius would find themselves living in Ephesus in a few years. They would both be part of a small community of people who had proclaimed Jesus as Lord. And somehow, these two men and their families, who would never have even spoken together, are friends. They share meals together, watch their kids grow up in the same community, and experience the presence of God in a diverse community.

Imagine yourself watching as Jesus enters Jerusalem on that fateful day, less than a week before his death. What would you see? What would you feel? What would you want from Jesus? Or not want from him? What do you see in Jesus?

What about the people in your life? Neighbors, friends, family members, co-workers. What would they see? Are they more like Yosef or Marius? Do they have dreams they want to be fulfilled? Or plans they do not want to be disrupted? Think about someone specific. Imagine them on the side of the road outside the gates of Jerusalem.

Maybe they need an encounter with Jesus. Maybe they need to realize a different kind of dream. Or perhaps they need a disruption to free them from life without God. Consider inviting them to our Easter service next week and our Eggstravaganza outreach on Saturday. Consider inviting them to see Jesus.

Conclusion

As we wrap up, let us think about one more character. We have seen this event through the eyes of Yosef and the eyes of Marius. I have invited you to see it fresh through your own eyes. But what about the eyes of Jesus?

What does Jesus see as he rides into town? When he catches the eye of Yosef, what does he think of this young man with dreams of a better life? When he notices Marius bus inside the gate, what does he feel about the Roman citizen who just wants life to be predictable? What goes through Jesus' mind when he sees you?

We can't be sure, but I think I have a good idea. At least half a dozen times in the gospels, we read that when Jesus saw the crowds, he felt compassion (Matthew 9:36, 14:14, 15:32, 20:34, Mark 1:41, Luke

7:13). So it's likely, even probable, that as Jesus walked into the city of Jerusalem and met the eyes of his fans, his skeptics, and his enemies, he felt compassion for all of them.

The heart of Jesus went out to Yosef and Marius. The heart of Jesus goes out to you. The heart of Jesus goes out to the people in your life who may not know him yet. Jesus sees all that stuff swirling around in our hearts, and he feels compassion.