

God's Secret Agent/s
John 12:1, 9–19

John 12:1 Six days before the Passover, Jesus therefore came to Bethany, where Lazarus was, whom Jesus had raised from the dead.

John 12:9 When the large crowd of the Jews learned that Jesus was there, they came, not only on account of him but also to see Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. 10 So the chief priests made plans to put Lazarus to death as well, 11 because on account of him many of the Jews were going away and believing in Jesus.

John 12:12 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,

John 12:15 “Fear not, daughter of Zion;
 behold, your king is coming,
 sitting on a donkey’s colt!”

John 12:16 His disciples did not understand these things at first, but when Jesus was glorified, then they remembered that these things had been written about him and had been done to him. 17 The crowd that had been with him when he called Lazarus out of the tomb and raised him from the dead continued to bear witness. 18 The reason why the crowd went to meet him was that they heard he had done this sign. 19 So the Pharisees said to one another, “You see that you are gaining nothing. Look, the world has gone after him.”

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus the Christ. Amen.

Introduction: The first Palm Sunday, people didn't get it

On Palm Sunday we celebrate the Triumphal Entry. In AD 30, when Pontius Pilate was the governor of the Roman province called Judea, on the first day of the week before the upcoming Passover feast, Jesus rode into Jerusalem. He was hailed as the king of God's chosen people, the people of Israel, descendants of Abraham and Moses and David, a people called the Jews.

God promises in the Bible that from this line of people will come someone to crush the head of the devil and evil. This figure will save us from our sins. He will lead

all who put their trust in him into a new creation when this evil age has run its course.

The palm branches people waved were a symbol of rebellion, what we would call nationalism. Jerusalem was an occupied city. It was part of the Roman empire. Jews in Jerusalem hated the Roman presence--not that they could do anything about it. They longed for someone to lead them to freedom from Roman rule. There was a feeling in the air that Jesus was their ticket to political independence.

For several years, people had been looking for a chance to put Jesus forward as their guy to topple Rome. Back in John 6, after Jesus fed 5,000, the people said, "This is indeed the Prophet who is to come into the world!" They meant the one foretold by Moses in Deuteronomy 18. This promised leader would be a conquering king ushering in an endless age of goodness and plenty. The people were so fired up about Jesus' ability to multiply fish and loaves that Jesus had this response: John 6:15 "Perceiving then that they were about to come and take him by force to make him king, Jesus withdrew again to the mountain by himself."

Jesus was a king, but not the king they were looking for.

They wanted a military leader like David on a prancing battle horse. Jesus came riding on a donkey, a ridiculous sight. They wanted someone to fulfill the will of the people. Jesus came to do the will of his Father in heaven. They wanted someone who could work miracles, like feeding the crowds and raising Lazarus. Jesus did these things. But it was not to become a dog-and-pony show. His miracles were meant to confirm the truth of his message and the people's need to repent of their sins.

Jesus was God's agent of change to defeat evil and establish God's kingdom. But notice what v. 16 says about Jesus' triumphal entry: "His disciples did not understand these things at first, but when Jesus was glorified [after his death and resurrection], then they remembered that these things had been written about him and had been done to him."

The people hailed Jesus as their secret weapon against the Romans. But actually, Jesus was like a secret agent on a mission no one understood. How many still do not understand Jesus and his mission? Let us pray.

Our heavenly Father, as we celebrate the holy occasion of Palm Sunday, help us welcome the Jesus you sent, not a phony Jesus we make up for ourselves. As we welcome him, help us to follow him and worship you. In his name we pray. Amen.

Point 1: People's view of Jesus and his view of himself were different

There is a striking difference between the way we hail Jesus on Palm Sunday and the way Jesus viewed himself that day. People hail him as the victor and the king. Jesus knew that the throne awaiting him was not a chair to sit on but a cross to be nailed to.

Jesus knew, you see, that he was a marked man. In John 11 we read that Jesus raised his friend Lazarus from the dead. This caused celebration for Lazarus and his sisters.

But it caused consternation for the ruling powers. The ruling council had an emergency meeting. They asked (John 11:47) “What are we to do? For this man performs many signs. 48 If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and the Romans will come and take away both our place and our nation.”

The rulers in Jerusalem were responsible for keeping the people subservient to Rome. If the people declared Jesus king, that would be insurrection. The Romans would not put up with it. They were noted for crushing rebellions in the lands over which they ruled. The ruling council had to act. We learn their decision in John 11:53: "So from that day on they made plans to put him to death."

So picture again Jesus on that donkey. What do you see? Do you with the rulers see a man you intend to take out by assassination? Do you with the people see a revolutionary who will topple Roman rule? Do you with Jesus see God's agent about to die for our sins and conquer death, but to do this in a way no one could foresee?

Do you see, in other words, that Jesus on that donkey is like a secret agent? Someone of my advanced age and rocker teenage years can't help but recall these words from a Johnny Rivers song called "Secret Agent Man":

There's a man who leads a life of danger.
To everyone he meets he stays a stranger.
With every move he makes another chance he takes.
Odds are he won't live to see tomorrow.

Here are four ways Jesus is like that secret agent.

1. "There's a man who leads a life of danger." Jesus led a life of danger. After his first sermon (Luke 4) his listeners tried to throw him off a cliff because his sermon offended them. The prophet who supported Jesus and paved the way for him, John the Baptist, had his head cut off. Some people were as mad at Jesus as the Taliban in Afghanistan are at the US, as mad as Boko Haram in Africa is at the West. John 5:18 says that people "were seeking all the more to kill [Jesus], because not only was he breaking the Sabbath, but he was even calling God his own Father, making himself equal with God." Jesus the Son of God did not live a safe and secure life but entrusted his life to God the Father. This exposed him to constant risk and danger.

A second way Jesus is like that secret agent:

2. "To everyone he meets he stays a stranger." Jesus made many close friends and attracted followers. But no one, not even his own family, could really fathom him or his mission. On the night he was betrayed there was this exchange: John 14:8 Philip said to him, "Lord, show us the Father, and it is enough for us." 9 Jesus said to him, "Have I been with you so long, and you still do not know me, Philip?" Jesus knows that right up till the end, at the deepest level, he is a puzzle even to those closest to him.

A third way Jesus is like that secret agent:

3. "With every move he makes another chance he takes." Now, Jesus was not at the mercy of chance; his life was secure in God's hands. But humanly speaking, every day and every hour took him closer to the arrest and sacrificial death that he knew awaited in Jerusalem. This was hidden from those around him even though Jesus spoke of it openly.

A fourth way Jesus is like that secret agent:

4. "Odds are he won't live to see tomorrow." Jesus defied the odds for three years, evading numerous plots and reaching out even to his enemies, dining with them, reasoning with them, inviting them like he did Nicodemus to believe and receive eternal life. But the day would come when he would lay down his life. We observe that day Friday of this week.

People's view of Jesus and his view of himself were different. Later a follower of Jesus puts it this way: in preaching Christ, ". . . we do impart wisdom, although it is not a wisdom of this age or of the rulers of this age, who are doomed to pass away. 7 But we impart a secret and hidden wisdom of God, which God decreed before the ages for our glory. 8 None of the rulers of this age understood this, for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory" (1 Cor 2).

Palm Sunday is the preface to Jesus' crucifixion which proves people did not and still do not understand the grace God extends to this world in Jesus Christ. That's why Jesus' prayer from the cross is so telling and so touching: "Father forgive them, for they know not what they do" (Lk 23:34). They thought they were defeating their worst enemy. Actually, they were killing the only hope we have of receiving forgiveness and eternal life.

But what does it mean for us that Jesus on Palm Sunday was so little understood that he went through life like a secret agent?

Point 2: Jesus' followers are God's secret agents too.

Who are you? If you're old enough, your driver's license tells a story: name, height, weight, eye color, hair color, address, organ donor or not, and so on. If you are a child or teenager, there's a file on you in your school's database. If you are employed there is a file on you. Doctors and insurance offices have our information, as do banks and credit card companies. Don't forget the IRS! And Google and FB. In one sense you are what all these databases say about you.

But who are you to your mother or father? Who are you to your spouse? Who are you to your best friend? If you are in serious athletics, who are you to your coach and teammates? If you are in the trenches of school teaching, who are you to colleagues? If you are in the military or law enforcement, who are you to those around you who have you back in the face of danger and vice versa?

This is not a database matter. We're talking personal make-up. We're talking about core identity, about loyalty and courage and love. That's different from demographic indicators and financial profile.

Who are you to God? If you believe in Jesus Christ, if you wake up day after day devoting your life to his kingdom call, you are God's secret agent in ways like Jesus was.

Not in every way. You did not exist one with the Father and the Spirit in eternity past like Christ did. You were not born of a virgin like Christ was. You have not lived a sinless life, you will not atone for sin on the cross, you will not become the head of the church, and you will not return from heaven in power and glory to judge the living and the dead.

But if you believe in Jesus Christ, if you wake up day after day devoting your life to his kingdom call, you are God's secret agent in ways like Jesus was. I will name just four in the interest of time.

You are God's secret agent in that:

1. God sees you as his child. However people may view you, God sees that person who has confessed faith in Christ, the person forgiven of their sin, the person freed from their sins for a life of growing in Christ and living your life for his glory. John's Gospel puts it this way: John 1:12 "But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, 13 who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God." In a culture suffering from loneliness and isolation, you are different, even if others can't see it. You belong to God even more personally than you ever belonged to your own parents. I hope you feel it and praise God for it.

You are God's secret agent in that:

2. God sees you as his ambassador. Your mother may have wanted you to be a doctor. You may have wanted to play NHL hockey. Regardless of our human goals, God has saved us to reflect his presence, his love, his word in all we do. In a culture where people can be full of themselves, you live for another, that is for God. And you live for others, because God gives you love to care for your neighbor like you care for yourself. You are more than just a person going through the motions of being a student, homemaker, employee, or retiree. You are God's agent of outreach, making a difference for his sake. In this you are guided and strengthened by God the Holy Spirit.

You are God's secret agent in that:

3. God sees you as a witness to the truth about Jesus Christ. We all communicate with people around us. You may be known for your wit or your wisdom or your friendliness. But there's also this: Jesus said, "You shall be my witnesses." That means we tell other people about Christ and his salvation. We change the world for the better by pointing people to the only one who can bring us to God. We are called to pray for the lost and help them find their way to God. Others may ignore or mistake us. But God knows what we do and why we do it.

You are God's secret agent in that:

4. God sees you as his worshipper. A lot of people kind of look down on religious folk, or even despise them. A lot of our social institutions now disparage Christian teaching, the Bible's teaching, about family, about personhood, about sexuality, about morality, about the meaning of life, about the sanctity of life. The world often sees serious Christians as extreme and a serious threat.

This has happened before. Jesus lived a life of perfect fellowship with God the Father. He lived a life of worship as he was in God's house of prayer, the synagogue or the temple, week by week. He communed with the Father constantly in prayer. Yet he was not understood but despised and rejected, or hailed as a puppet king to be manipulated.

God the Father saw the worshipful life of his Son. He delighted in Jesus. Jesus rejoiced in God the Father. As we trust the Father day by day and gather for worship week by week, our heavenly Father sees us. He knows us. He welcomes our preoccupation with him.

People around us may be far from God and view commitment to Christ negatively. God sees those who trust his Son as his agents of redemption. He is for us and with us. He loves, protects, equips, and strengthens us.

On the first Palm Sunday, people saw Jesus as a man to be used or abused. But he was God's agent of our eternal hope. On this Palm Sunday, by following the Christ who died for us and rose and will return, we serve as God's agents too.

Amen and amen.