



The brown textured cover with a golden seal felt special, felt different somehow. It tried as it might to sit there on the shelf with the Irish folk songs, the Peter, Paul and Mary, the Trini Lopez, the Linda Ronstadt, the Judy Collins, the Flashdance, the Motion Picture Soundtrack, all the classics. But that 2LP cast recording of Jesus Christ Superstar stood out even in my father's eclectic vinyl collection. I mean, Trini Lopez is going deep. That's a deep cut. You all know. Dad's probably watching.

I'm talking, I'm talking today about the 1970 London cast concept album with the open box cover and the lyrics printed in this cool brown folio piece. I can just hear it.

*Hosanna, hey sanna, sanna sanna ho.*

*Sanna hey, sanna hosanna, papam pam, pam, pam.*

*Hey, JC, JC, will you fight for me?*

*Sanna ho, sanna hey, superstar.*

*Why waste your breath moaning at the crowd?*

*No, I'm just kidding. Am I?*

Welcome to my fever dream, everyone. If you have no earthly idea what I'm talking about, let me say first, I'm sorry for your childhood. Second, don't worry. I'll catch you up. And I should say a third. If you are atheist, we love you. Buckle up for what is about to happen. If you came on any other Sunday,

you'd hear a lot more of what you want to hear, but this is Lent, and this is our last Sunday of Lent, and it is about Palm Sunday.

And in the musical, Jesus Christ Superstar, Jesus, the character, arrives in Bethpage, which is right outside of Jerusalem. And in the Gospel of Matthew, as we heard, he's welcomed and greeted as a kind of hero, a superstar. And that's part of why the people are singing this song. And it all makes sense, actually, because the translation of the Greek word Christ or Christos is stadium rock idol. It's the technical term. No, no. It means most commonly anointed one as a noun. A translation of the Hebrew word Messiah, which means savior.

In more common Greek, though, of the era, it also means covered in oil. So the next time you're ordering a salad, you could order it Christos style, and he won't know what you mean, but you'll get a good laugh. It can also mean just smeared when it refers to something that's applied like a medicine or a remedy. So in this final sermon in our series on reclaiming religious language, we end this series with the word Christ, about whom very little has ever been written or said before. I'm lulling you into a false sense of security. I kid.

It's fair to say actually that assigning Jesus, the title of Christ might be one of the most consequential events in the course of human history. Upon this act is built yet more acts upon acts, structures upon structures, belief upon beliefs, groups and organizations with tremendous sway in our social lives, in our economies, in our laws, more and more, and in our civil society. And many who built these systems and who rely on them do so, do so, on what they call the authority of scripture.

And I think, I think that anyone who makes a law say with scriptural authority or who denies someone a right, perhaps a civil right based on scriptural authority, or does any kind of powerful act based on scriptural authority needs to answer just one question for me. Tell me how on God's green acre one man could ride a donkey and its colt, her baby donkey, with one cloak at the same damn time. It is the real miracle, the real mystery of faith.

Now, if you asked your average evangelical Christian what does Christ mean, they'll likely say it's a title, possibly derived from the Greek word Christos, but it is meant solely for the person of Jesus and that it signifies that Jesus is King and Jesus is Lord. And they do have a point because after all, there is only one person named after the Greek word Christos. Well, except for anyone named Chris, or Christine, or Christopher, or Christiane. Hi, Christiane. And the hundreds of millions of other people who actually have this name, though many of them do not proclaim to be the savior of all mankind, to be fair.

So what does our text really mean? What is going on in here? One school of biblical scholars explains this strange scene as caused by an overly zealous, yet undereducated translator who took the text in Zechariah that the author Matthew quotes, that says in Zechariah, "A donkey, a colt, a beast of burden, three identifiers of one animal," in poetic Hebrew, likely referring to this one animal, but the author, whoever wrote Matthew or translated it, didn't understand that and was so afraid to lose any

words in the translation, he said a donkey and a colt. So instead of a comma, they used an and. And that's really one of the best explanations of how we got that.

But another school of scholars, authority of scripture, looks at it and says, "No, what must be going on here as they hypothesize is that Jesus would ride the older, more experienced donkey on some terrain that that donkey was better on, then switch to the colt, to the younger donkey when that was more appropriate, in the way that you might switch from your ATV to your sports car on different terrain." Yeah, that makes a lot of sense. Sorry. The debate, as you can tell, is as unsettled really as it is unsettling.

So if there's no agreement about this particular mystery at the center of the Christian story, how can such certainty come from so many about what so much is of the will of Christ, the will of this same person, what it must be? Christ is the Greek translation, as I said, of the word Messiah. So when we view these words together, they're more attuned, more in meaning to anointed one actually than covered in oil because, in the Hebrew scriptures, kings and prophets themselves were anointed, were set apart, is what it means.

Now, in our reading from Matthew today, the illusion to David is in there, a king who was also anointed and thought by some to be the Messiah is there in the quotation from Zechariah. So is the riding of a donkey, a colt, the beast of burden, clearly referring all to one animal in three different ways. And Jesus, in the Matthew story, is said, is said to be in the Davidic line, is related to David, referred to actually as a son of David who many thought was the Messiah. And Jesus is meant to fulfill these messianic hopes, the savior of the Jewish people promised in their scriptures in all of this and more is in the text that we have today as Jesus crosses the streets of his small village.

Now this week, some other small areas outside a city had some changes to their streets, too. The destruction of crosswalks that celebrated love in the form of rainbows, which are also biblical, but that's another story, and the imperative that Black Lives Matter in crosswalks were removed by order of this state's governor for safety reasons. Apparently, a pony in the middle of a street up the street is fine, does not pose a safety concern, okay. So if we're at it, if we're asking people so sure of Christ's message to explain the donkey question, maybe we can ask them also to explain how four chapters later, when Jesus says that he is, that he is present as those in society who are most marginalized, not just on their side, not just for them or having their backs, but them in the flesh, the stranger, the naked, the hungry, the poor, the sick, and the imprisoned.

Explain to us how crosswalks in parts of a city where they give people who have been marginalized some sense of community and some belonging are a safety hazard. Explain to us also a war named by a cabinet member as being waged in the name of Christ, his words, not mine, that kills strangers a world away, raises the cost of living on all of us for those living on the edge of their means in particular. Explain to us a process where foreigners are imprisoned for weeks beyond the legal limit, and whose illnesses are not even being treated to the point of death. Say what you want, actually, about whether someone's entitled to be here, but the punishment for being here should not be death. Right.

And while we're waiting for answers on those, interesting fact, you know who didn't say a whole lot about whether he was Christ or not? Jesus. That's right, people. There are a few places where he confesses at last to being the Messiah in some ways. The most notable, though, is in the Gospel of John when speaking to the Samaritan woman at the well, who was shocked that a Jewish man would speak to her, let alone a holy man, because Jews were forbidden from speaking to Samaritans at the time.

A lot has been said about the Samaritan woman over the years, and I don't like it. I don't like a lot of it. But you know who didn't judge or shame her about her having been married a few times? Jesus. You know who engaged with her intelligently and as an equal? Jesus. You know who trusted her with the only affirmative statement identifying himself as the Messiah or the Christ in all four gospels, because the rest of the instances, he is answering someone else's questions? Jesus. See, the Samaritans were disliked and distrusted by the Jewish people because they once worshiped the same set of gods. And as the Jewish faith moved toward monotheism, Samaritans retained worshiping Yahweh, but also some of the other gods that they had worshiped.

They kept worshiping those in addition to Yahweh, so they were singled out for their beliefs in the texts we have as being on the margins of society. And yet Jesus has one of the most honest conversations of his entire ministry with a Samaritan, told her something plainly that he told nobody else. Could it be that Jesus felt more comfortable with her than with anybody else? Could it be that only someone on the margins of society would even understand? Could it be that only she could know how alone he was feeling, how facing his future alone could feel in doing what he was called to do as the anointed one, as the Messiah, as a Christ?

He had more in common with someone society had scorned and marginalized than with any king, with any priest or with any disciple he'd ever met, because he knew he was totally different, even if he looked the same, even when he was praised and had hopes heaped upon him, especially when he was praised and had hopes heaped upon him, because there is no place as lonely as a crowd sometimes, and especially when you know you are different for what you believe or what you see, different than everyone around you. And many of us know that for our own reasons and our own ways.

And the poet we heard said it this way, "Oh, loneliness," he says. "My body responds. This empty road is a house where no one lives. What strange fire we bring when we come into this house? What strange fire indeed?" As we heard, the root word for Christ had a life before it was ever taken into the scriptures. It only appears in Greek literature in two places that are widely known before it appeared there in the scriptures, and one of them is actually in the play, *Prometheus Bound* by Aeschylus. The tragedy details the plight of the Titan Prometheus who gives fire to humans along with knowledge, much to the distaste of the gods.

Then he is chained to a rock for his transgression, some would say crucified for bringing sacred knowledge to humankind. The parallels to Jesus and Prometheus are nothing new to scholars, half man, half God, giving humans the power to see and to destroy one another. What strange fire we bring when we come into this house? In Prometheus, that is where the root of Christ is actually used to

mean cure or medicine or, in a word, to save. Christ may be a title, but the truth is this. The fire that made a Christ of Jesus to some is a fire that has forged others, too. Before he ever walked the earth and for millennia since that time, the act of rescuing, of saving is different for each of us, but saving happens here. It happens in places we don't even know or see at times, and it happens because we are the ones we have been waiting for.

The sermons in this series, we have said it over and over, holding up the seam. No one is coming to sort this out to separate the wheat from the chaff, the sheep from the goats, Christ, the anointed one, the one touched with oil is you, is me, is us. We each are the ones smeared with the healing ointment to save. That strange fire that we bring when we come into this house, we are all in this mess together when I hold you, you hold me as April sang to us, reimagining the words of his eye is on the sparrow, and they speak to this shared experience that we each can find when our love reaches beyond the pages, just the pages we're used to, in deeper, beyond the words that we think we know and into what the poet calls America's brave margins. And America's margins have always been so brave.

But I will tell you something now about those margins as someone who has spent some time there themselves. I am tired of telling people in those margins to be brave. I'm tired of drawing inspiration from people on the margins. They have enough going on, guys. I'm tired of holding the margins up as some anointed, holy place. I'm tired of people doing that because being marginalized sucks. Then maybe you should stop singing show tunes in your sermons, TJ. I hear you. I get it. Point well taken. Sorry.

Sometimes I think that verb, smearing, gerund, fine, but that verb, smearing, is the right meaning of the root of Christ sometimes. I think it's right when it's evoked to name a war as a holy war supported by Christ. I think that's smearing the name. I think it's smearing the name of Christ when it's used to support the demonization of those who only want to live their true lives and to love the people they want to love, including themselves. I think it's smearing the name of Christ when it's used to invoke the title to exclude, to minimize, to cheapen or to divide. Christ is what Jesus was called in the Christian scriptures because Jesus acted in ways that were God-like.

And what is it to be God except to see, to know, be fully involved, fully in all life, in all death, in all matter, in all manner of things, from the tiniest eye of the sparrow to shaping the entire universe. The example of Christ we see in Jesus is named Christ because he showed that ability to heal, to create communities of care and understanding, to speak truth, to power, and to act even when he was afraid of the consequences for him and for those he loved. He did not pick on the vulnerable for power. He picked on the powerful for the sake of the vulnerable. Right.

And the movement he started, fire still through the ages. We feel that we, whether we like it or not, and I did warn you, we are inheritors. We're inheritors of this fire that guides us still in our own ways, each of us. Whether we are deconstructing what we knew or thought we knew and were taught, whether we are learning a new what we can about our faith, about our future, we are in this holy conversation. We are anointed by faith to be the touchstones, the rallying points, the guides, the mystics, the small still voice inside us all that sings Hosanna to the heavens, will you save me that

sings Hosanna in the streets? Will you fight for me that sings Hosanna in the darkest night of our souls? Will you help me?

And what is the answer? The strange fire we bring into this place. It is each one of us, in each one of us. It is all of us together. We are the ones we have been waiting for. Do not let your fire go out. May it ever be so, blessed be an amen.