

SERMON: Who is This?

TEXT: Matthew 21:1-11

A month ago, few if any of us had ever heard the name, Dr. Anthony Fauci. Today, if you watch or listen or read any news at all, you know that he is our resident national expert on COVID-19. Officially, he is the director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, and is one of the most prominent and respected voices in the nation's fight against the coronavirus pandemic. He's there with the President at the White House's daily Coronavirus Task Force briefings.

He's THE expert in this country. Obviously, he knows what he's talking about. He's sharing crucial information that we need to know in a clear and direct manner. He puts no spin on the facts and has no political agenda. He's not pulling any punches or trying to soften the blow. He tells the truth. For this, he's become almost a household name. In some places, he's so popular that his face is appearing on t-shirts and socks, donuts and cupcakes. People look up to him. People respect him. People are celebrating him.

On the other hand, the truth hurts. His messages are bleak. He estimates that deaths in the United States could reach up to 200,000. And he says that the only

way we can reduce this number is by severely limiting our contact with one another. Just this week he indicated that he is in favor of a national stay-at-home order for the next 30 days. Many of us have already been staying close to home for over two weeks. But “mitigation is working,” he said. And it’s the only thing that’s going to work to stop the spread of the virus and to keep deaths at a minimum.

As much as we appreciate his expertise and truth-telling, nobody wants to hear that we’re going to be cooped up for another month. Out of work. And away from our favorite activities. After all, it’s springtime. And it’s Easter time. And we’re missing March Madness and the opening of baseball season; soccer practice and prom and concerts and graduation; and Easter egg hunts and full sanctuaries on Easter Sunday. Even the introverts who love nothing more than staying at home alone are getting tired of this. Now, threats have been made against Dr. Fauci, and his security provided by the federal government has been increased.

It’s a love-hate relationship we have with Dr. Fauci. One minute we’re praising him; the next we want to shut him up.

Hmm. Reminds me of Palm Sunday. Jesus' entrance into Jerusalem is often called *triumphal*. He is celebrated. He is loved. He is praised. He is treated like a king. And when the people shout, *Hosanna*, they are not so much praising him as they are pleading with him. *Save Us!*

One article I read suggested, "The crowds themselves may not even be from Jerusalem. These are, perhaps, the very people Jesus healed and fed, country folk too desperate to wait at home for help and too poor to buy their own lunch.... According to Matthew, the people of Jerusalem don't even know who Jesus is. There are no marble busts of this messiah, no propaganda posters or laudatory TV interviews. Jesus is an unknown." (Katie Hines-Shah, *Palm Sunday isn't just a happy parade*, Palm Sunday, Holy Week, and Easter Guide for Reflection, www.ChristianCentury.org) WHO IS THIS?

Though many don't know him, they have a picture in their minds of the person they are expecting. And over the next several days, it becomes clear that Jesus is not the mighty hero the people were looking for. They want a winner. They want a military leader who will save them from the Roman occupation. Instead of acting like a king, Jesus allows himself to be arrested. During his trial, he speaks not a word to defend himself.

This is certainly not the person who will save them. He has no armies waiting in the wings. He has no political power, no backing from big money, no support from religious leaders or anyone else in high places. His only show of force or authority comes when he cleanses the temple, overturning the tables of the moneychangers and saying, “My house shall be called a house of prayer, but you are making it a den of robbers.”

Later in the week, Jesus will tell his friend Judas to go and do what he has to do. Then he will scold another disciple for drawing his sword and cutting off the ear of one of the arresting soldiers. Clearly, he’s letting this play out. He seems to have no interest in saving anyone - least of all, himself.

Angry and disappointed, perhaps even feeling foolish for being taken in by him, the crowd now calls for Jesus to be crucified. And as he hangs on the cross, suffering the most humiliating and painful form of execution, the spectators mock him. “He saved others, but he can’t save himself!” Still, he asks God to forgive them, “for they don’t know what they’re doing.”

WHO IS THIS? Certainly not the Savior they were expecting. Frankly, neither is Jesus the Savior that we are expecting.

As much as we have all prayed to awaken from this nightmare pandemic, we are not going to be rescued any time soon. Every person in this world - on this planet - is a victim of this virus, whether they know it or not. And we are not going to be saved from it. This will not be over tomorrow. Jesus will not protect us from this if we deny the science and pack our churches and pray like we've never prayed before. That's not who Jesus is. That's not how salvation works.

Maybe we're asking the wrong question. Instead of asking WHO IS THIS and trying to fit Jesus into our image of a true savior, maybe we should look at him more closely to learn what it really means to be saved.

At the last meal Jesus shared with his disciples, his closest friends, he gave them a mandate. This is where we get the name "Maundy Thursday." Maundy means mandate, and the mandate is: *Love one another as I have loved you.*

Then Jesus broke the bread, saying, “This is my body, broken for you.” And he poured the wine, saying, “This is my blood, shed for you.”

He did all this knowing that soon, their love for him would be overcome by fear. In the garden, they would fail to stay awake and pray with him. After his arrest, most of his friends would run away to save themselves. Another who had promised to die with him, would deny him. One would betray him with a kiss.

These were his friends, and Jesus loved them nonetheless. Jesus even loved his enemies. The love that Jesus teaches and lives and gives is a selfless love. A sacrificial love. Jesus saves us out of love - *for God so loved the world*. Jesus saves us for the sake of love. All-encompassing love. Unconditional love. Everlasting love.

Dr. Fauci, with all his expertise will not save us from this pandemic. But if we listen to him, we can help save one another.

Even Jesus will not save us from this pandemic. But if we listen to him, and we are willing to sacrifice some of our freedoms, we can help save one another. And that is how we demonstrate love for one another. Love for the world.

I saw the following statement on Facebook. “When you go out and see the empty streets, the empty stadiums, the empty train platforms, don’t say to yourself, *it looks like the end of the world*. What you’re seeing, in that negative space, is how much we do care for each other, for our grandparents, for our immuno-compromised brothers and sisters, for people we will never meet. People will lose jobs over this. Some will lose their businesses. And some will lose their lives. All the more reason to take a moment, when you’re out on your walk, or on your way to the store, or just watching the news, to look into the emptiness and marvel at all of that love. Let it fill you and sustain you. IT ISN’T THE END OF THE WORLD. It is the most remarkable act of global solidarity we may ever witness.” (Paul Williams, paulielama2)

May we love *and save* one another as Jesus loves *and saves* us... to the glory of God!

AMEN.