



Pastor Ken's Sermon

PALM SUNDAY MESSAGE
JOHN 12:12-19 & PHILIPPIANS 2:5-11
MARCH 28, 2021

"OF GOATS AND DONKEYS"

There is a phrase that's come into vogue recently, an acronym actually – "GOAT", meaning "Greatest of All Time." I'm not sure I'd really like to be referred to as a goat – the poor critter doesn't have a lot of star power in the animal world it seems to me, but the phrase is now particularly part of the sporting world's lexicon. Current "GOAT's in sports is "*you know who*" in football – that quarterback who walked off Lambeau field in January headed to his 10th Super Bowl. LeBron James is talked of as basketball's GOAT. In hockey "the Great One", Wayne Gretzky usually the one who gets the 'GOAT' nod. In golf it's a toss-up between Jack Nicklaus and Tiger Woods. Tennis – not sure.

Nor who gets the nod in baseball – Barry Bonds was a candidate till it was revealed his stats got a little boost from little pills he kept in his locker. My vote goes to the late, great Milwaukee/Atlanta Brave Hank Aaron! But woe be to that athlete that decides to anoint themselves a GOAT – even a qualified one. This past week a player for the Golden State Warriors named Draymond Green pronounced himself a GDOAT – the greatest *defensive* player of all time to a howl of cyberspace protest – how dare he!

Two questions it seems to me arise from all this hoo-hah about GOATS – who decides and on what basis – personal statistics, value to his or her team, championships? And just what is "greatness?" That may be the most important question of them all. Our lesson from John recounts the opening scene of a six-day drama we call "Holy Week." It is a story of greatness that doesn't match the definition of that word we've been conditioned to. Who decides what is great? The word can mean large, numerous, predominant, distinguished, preeminent, skilled, superior, or of considerable duration. By those sorts of measurements few would have said there was a "GOAT" riding a donkey into Jerusalem for the Passover of the Jews.

There was excitement, there was hope, and Jesus was ascribed a pretty lofty title - "King of Israel". But Jesus' three-year ministry was largely confined to the "backwater" region of Galilee, Judaism's "minor league", it's flyover country, the home of fishing villages and little towns of simple folks easily swayed by a flashy preacher. Even there a surge of initial interest in Jesus was fraying at the edges as his teaching became more pointed and personal. Outside Jerusalem there was a crowd, and like crowds tend to get, it was loud, but it was also dwarfed by most in Jerusalem who were at best curious. This was the big leagues – a prophet would have to earn their reputation – and watch what they say!

Still, any modern marketing whiz could make a case that Jesus exceeded most any definition of greatness. His miracles alone would make the case. His teaching was poised and remarkable. His command of the Scriptures and application to human nature unassailable - if only it wasn't so convicting. By the unreligious in this and every age he is dismissed. Far more often those who put their trust in him are dismissed as fools, dangerous ideologues or hypocrites, both when what we believe and do don't line up, and especially when what we do and say is unpopular.

But as we enter this week we call "holy", the issue is not whether Jesus was great – but rather if he was God. And if he is, then the issue of what he did and said is settled. They are what we must do and say. The events of Holy Week are really this great struggle within the human heart and mind not only of whether one who appears to be a man could in fact be God, but if "*this kind of man*" who endured *this kind* of suffering and death could be God. And if we'll trust that he is.

That's a decision each must make. This is no week to put up proofs or laying out a case based on the accomplishments of Jesus' three-year career – counting miracles, numbering converts, tallying minds changed and baptisms performed or totaling up "new congregations started" (there were none by the way). This a hope filled, hope dashed, allegiance professing, allegiance denouncing, ugly and oh so glorious week in which we are presented with one question...do you believe the man Jesus, who died on a cross, is God – with the only evidence of this being the very fact of his sad and humiliating end?

We live in a culture infatuated with identifying GOATS. We regularly produce lists of the most-wealthy, most valuable, most attractive and have people whose only apparent achievement is having become a Facebook celebrity. In such a world Jesus can be a hard sell. Jesus stood firmly on the word of God, but he was none of the things we think of as "great" and moreover he was gentle to both follower and detractor, he mostly avoided word-wars and simply let folks see and hear who he was and then decide if he was for them.

We who love the Lord lament the fading influence of Jesus and his church. But if it's numbers help – consider that this coming week billions will call on his name in prayer, praise and thanksgiving. Billions! People of every culture, every race, every economic strata and every "category" that we put people into that God pays absolutely no attention to whatsoever! Because all he wants is one, you, as you are, to become what he created you to be.

In Jesus time death on a cross was a dishonorable end even for a slave. Anyone would want to avoid it at all costs. How ironic that people thought to honor him by throwing down their cloaks when Jesus would show his greatness by dying while soldiers gambled for his. How do you describe someone who would die this way willingly, while dying give a murderer the promise of paradise, and tell those watching they were forgiven? Would you call him a GOAT? Or would you call him be what he truly is...your forgiver, your Savior, a most amazing Servant King? AMEN