

“No Experience Necessary”

Zechariah 9:9-17
Mark 1:1-11

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A few years ago there was series of strange orchestrated events in New York City and London and some other large cities called Flash Mobs. A flash mob is a large group of people who assemble suddenly in a public place, perform an unusual action for a brief time, then quickly disperse. Jennifer and I decided that it sounded like a fun experience, so we got on the email list to be notified about the next flash mob.

We received an email instructing us to meet at a certain bar near Time Square. We would receive further instructions. Around 6 pm a man handed us a slip of paper, which told us to go to the Toys R Us in Times Square at 6:15. We were to act like normal shoppers. At 6:30 we were to unassumingly assemble in the room with the giant mechanical T-Rex and when it began to roar we were to all drop to our knees and quake in fear because it is a terrible God. After one minute of this we were to quickly blend into the crowd and leave the store. I stood by to video the event while Jennifer joined in.

It all happened just as planned. It was quite dramatic. A few hundred people suddenly dropped to their knees and began to cry out things like, “We’re not worthy!” or “Have mercy on us, oh terrible T-Rex!” Those who were not in on the joke watched both curiously and anxiously, wondering what in the world was going on. The store manager thought they were under attack or something. Before he had time to do anything about it was over and everyone was gone.

We went on our way excited by the experience, but wondering what the meaning of all this was. We participated in a few more thinking that some great secret would be revealed about this profound social experiment, but in the end there was nothing. It was only an experience. Fun, but meaningless.

I wonder if the folks who waved the palm branches and shouted out, “Hosanna!” were maybe looking for an experience. This was the beginning of an exciting week in Jerusalem, Passover Week. To some it was like Mardi Gras to others it was a deeply religious pilgrimage. To local merchants it was great business. And for other locals it was probably either a welcome interruption or a royal annoyance.

Jews came from all over. Some came from as far south Northern Africa and other from as far East as Turkey and from as far north as Southern Europe. For those who traveled particularly it was the experience of a lifetime. They had dreamed and planned of celebrating Passover at the heart of the Jewish world: Jerusalem. They came to marvel at King Herod’s temple, which was one of the wonders of the world. They came for the Super Bowl and Disney world wrapped into one religious and cultural experience. Some might even watch a few infidels crucified by the Roman power. All in good fun.

Little did anyone know that the same man that had been hailed as a king at the

beginning of the week would be featured in a crucifixion at the end of the week. Was anyone seeking the Messiah or were they just seeking an experience? Certainly the Jesus that came riding in royal fashion through the very gate known to be the gate where the Messiah was predicted to enter fit the bill. But rather than riding on to assume power, he rode to the Temple and simply looked around. It was like he just became a tourist like everyone else, taking in the marvelous Temple.

When I lived and worked in Manhattan, I worked about a block away from St. Patrick's Cathedral. It's one of the must see attractions of the Big Apple. I remember the first time I entered. It took my breath away. I could smell the spicy, sweet incense. I could hear the intonations of a priest reciting his hourly refrain. My eyes could barely take it all in. But I never really went all the way in. I just stood on the edge of it all for an experience. And occasionally when I would walk by on my way to an appointment or lunch, I would just slip in for a moment or two for a bit of holy experience. But I wasn't looking for a Messiah.

Jesus stood on the edge and would go no further that day. It was late. But he would be back. He would come back the next day and turn the place upside down. Jesus wasn't there for an experience, he was not simply going to stand on the edge, he would dive right into the reality. Jesus was always out on the edges. He walked amongst lepers, and prostitutes and tax collectors. Not interested in a nice, safe experience. When he rode that colt into Jerusalem, he was riding into danger. He had a job to do.

The edges of the city might welcome him as a king, but the heart of the city utterly rejected Jesus. The Temple authorities were not interested in a Messiah, they were interested in hanging on to what power the Romans let them have. Jesus was a threat to the status quo. His triumphal entry was much, much more than a nice, little parade. It was a statement, loud and clear, to the powers that be: I am in charge. True power is mine. I am the King. And by going first to the Temple he identified his main target.

But that was the wrong target. The Jewish Messiah was supposed to target Rome, the outside oppressors. Even those who were seeking a Messiah would be disappointed in Jesus. This Messiah would assume a kingly throne after kicking out Rome's imperial posterior. His throne would be very different. It would not be the feel good experience anyone, including the disciples, were looking for.

To some degree we are all looking for an experience when it comes to our religious life, whether it be in our personal spiritual life or at our church. At church, we want moving music. We want sermons that make us laugh and cry. We want a building with aesthetic beauty. In our personal spirituality we want to feel God. We want to have that moment that gives us goose bumps. We want something mystical; a dream, a vision, a voice. And there's nothing wrong with this. I want it to.

However, it is easy to confuse the experience of religion with what is truly important. It's easy to mistake the experience for the Messiah. Are we looking for an experience or a messiah?

Feelings and experiences come and go. And if our salvation is dependent upon a

feeling, then most of us are in trouble most of the time. But the good news, is that our salvation is dependent only upon the Messiah. And not an experience with the Messiah, but a relationship with the Messiah.

It's kind of like a marriage. So many people mistake the feelings of falling in love with true love. You meet someone and the feelings are wonderful, they are intense. You're in love. You get married and the intensity comes and goes kind of like the flash mob, it was fun, but what does it mean. And many people split up. I'm not in love any more. I just don't feel it anymore. But that is not a relationship. Love is something intentional. It is something you work on everyday. It's like making bread everyday. You get up and you mix the ingredients, you let it rest, watch it rise, you kneed it, you let it rest, you kneed it, you shape it, you watch it rise, you bake it. You smell it, you break it, you eat it. It sustains you. It puts a smile on your face. You got to sleep full. You wake up and you do it again.

It is the same with your relationship with Christ. Christ mixes the ingredient and you need it. And then it rises. The smell is pleasing to both us and to God. And it tastes even better. There is work and there is experience, but neither the work nor the experience are what saves us. Christ saves us. We just have to need it. And it wasn't what Jesus did at the beginning of the week when everyone was on his side that saves us. It is what he did at the end of the week when everyone rejected him, betrayed him, denied him that saves us.

We don't need some wonderful experience-to-experience salvation. All that is needed has already been done. It wasn't pretty, it didn't sound good, it didn't give anyone goose bumps. It just hurt. But it saves. It still works today. There is nothing we can do to improve it, make it more relevant, or make it more technologically advanced.

Experience doesn't create our salvation, salvation creates our experience. When we realize that we have already been saved, the work has already been done, nothing we can do or experience to earn it, we then experience the peace, joy, and freedom that we find in having a relationship with our Messiah. And not a Messiah that we just wave at in the parades of Christmas, Palm Sunday, and Easter, but a Messiah that we get up with everyday and experience throughout our lives in good times and bad times. In warm fuzzy moments and moments when we just hurt. Or even in moments when we feel nothing. Just a dull nothing. He is still there. The feelings may come and go, but he is constant. And he is our salvation.

Perhaps you are waiting for some incredible experience before you begin a relationship with Christ. Perhaps you are waiting for the parade to come your way. No experience is necessary. You do not need to be an expert at anything. You do not need any special credentials. You do not need to be able to tell some amazing story about how Christ appeared to you in the form of a potato chip. You only need a Messiah, who has done everything necessary when he died on a cross. The experience will come along with the relationship. The offer has been made. Take, eat, and you will rise.