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When God Comes In  
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It was a strange looking procession that made its way into Jerusalem that day. A great crowd of people was on the road moving into the city. In the middle of the throng was a man riding on the back of a donkey. He seemed an unlikely figure to be the center of so much attention. He was obviously not a city dweller. He did not have the bearing of a wealthy or powerful man. There was nothing impressive about his manner of dress or his mode of transportation. But to those who were escorting him into the city he was clearly something special. They were carried away by their enthusiasm. They were shouting praises that had not been heard since the days when Israel had its own king who would ride triumphantly into the city to shouts of "Hosanna ... blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord (Matthew 21:9)." This man was being treated as a King. Those who were not followers of the man on the donkey were perplexed by the spectacle that was unfolding in Jerusalem that day. They asked one another, "Who is this (Matthew 21:10)?"

When Matthew describes this spectacle in the 21<sup>st</sup> chapter of his gospel he writes that Jesus' entry into Jerusalem places the city in turmoil. The word that Matthew uses for turmoil is a form of the word for earthquake. Jesus' entry is a disturbance which shakes the foundations of the city. It is a moment of cataclysmic change. It creates a crisis which invites people to think about their own lives.

The congregation of a country church in Georgia was confronted with this kind of crisis during a Sunday evening service in October of 1938. The preacher was in the middle of his evening sermon when a member named Sam burst into the service trembling with fear and excitement. Gasping for breath he interrupted the preacher, shouting, "Martians are attacking the earth in spaceships. Some of them have already landed in New Jersey!" Seeing the stunned looks of disbelief in the eyes of the worshippers, Sam shouted, "I swear it is true. I heard it on the radio!" Of course what Sam heard was the infamous broadcast of Orson Welles' Mercury Theater radio production of *The War of the Worlds*. But no one in the room knew that at the time.

The preacher, having lost his concentration, did not know what to say. He certainly did not have in his hip pocket a sermon addressing the subject of interplanetary invasion. At that point an old farmer stood up and gripped the pew in front of him. He said, "I 'speck what Sam says ain't completely true. But if it is true, we're in the right place here in church. So let's get on with the service." The farmer understood that if the end of the world as he knew it was at hand, it would be better to be in church praising God than out in the pasture shooting buckshot at the sky (Story from Pete Peery in *Journal for Preachers*, Lent 2011, page 47).

The people of Jerusalem who were confused about the identity of Jesus were not as savvy as the old farmer. Instead of using this moment to think about the direction of their own lives, many were caught up in panic. Some were drawn into a plot to kill Jesus. Those who were paying attention could

begin to see the nature of this earthquake disturbance in what Jesus does first after entering the city. He goes immediately to the temple. There he takes the law into his own hands and drives the money changers out.

This is a direct challenge to the religious, political, and economic powers of the city. The temple provided for the sale of animals which had been purified for use in ritual sacrifice. But one could not use contaminated Gentile money to buy these purified animals. It was necessary to convert Gentile money to Jewish currency before the transaction could be completed. Hefty fees were charged for this currency exchange. This economic exploitation of worshipers was fueling the profits of currency dealers, animal dealers, and the temple administration. Jesus challenges this economic injustice which pollutes the worship life of the city. Jesus' call for justice shakes the foundations on which the city is built. The question continues to reverberate. Who is this?

The first people to protest are the scribes and priests. This is their system which Jesus is attacking. It is their authority which is at stake when he issues his challenge. It is their salaries which are funded by this exploitive temple system. They cannot participate in the shout of joy which comes from Jesus' followers. The cataclysmic change that Jesus brings into our world is always a threat to those who benefit most from the world as it is. At this level we can readily understand why the scribes and priests could not celebrate the arrival of Jesus in their city. The truth is that we all have something to fear when God comes into our sphere of activity. God has a disturbing way of shaking the foundations on which our world is constructed. But the One who challenges the unjust systems of our world also offers us a more enduring foundation. This foundation is built on the grace and mercy of God. It is a spiritual foundation that change can never sweep away.

I learned something about the nature of this foundation six years ago when I visited the French village of Le Chambon. This Huguenot village in the mountains of southern France sheltered thousands of Jews who fled there during the Holocaust of World War II. There I visited the grave of the pastor who led this effort. There I also learned that what the people of the village did during the German occupation of their country was not an isolated act of compassion. They had been caring for refugees for generations. They knew how to shelter people who were in trouble. One observer described the spiritual orientation of these villagers in these words:

The largest part of their education had come from the teachings of the village church and from its faithful pastor, Andre Trocmé. Each week Pastor Trocmé proclaimed the Word, and each week the members of the parish studied the Scriptures, and each week they came to understand something of what it meant to be called to discipleship and faithfulness ... When the Nazis came to town looking for Jews, the people of Le Chambon quietly did what was right: they sheltered their Jewish brothers and sisters from harm. One elderly woman, who faked a heart attack when the Nazis came to search her house said later, "Pastor always taught us that there comes a time in every life when a person is asked to do something for Jesus. When our time came, we knew what to do (Robert Dunham, *Journal for Preachers*, Lent 2011, pages 23-24)."

When we build our lives on this foundation we too are ready to do something for Jesus; and then we can shout for joy when God comes in.