

## Let's Make a Deal

### **Matthew 21:1-11**

When they had come near Jerusalem and had reached Bethphage, at the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two disciples, saying to them, "Go into the village ahead of you, and immediately you will find a donkey tied, and a colt with her; untie them and bring them to me. If anyone says anything to you, just say this, 'The Lord needs them.' And he will send them immediately." "This took place to fulfill what had been spoken through the prophet, saying, "Tell the daughter of Zion, Look, your king is coming to you, humble, and mounted on a donkey, and on a colt, the foal of a donkey." The disciples went and did as Jesus had directed them; they brought the donkey and the colt, and put their cloaks on them, and he sat on them. A very large crowd spread their cloaks on the road, and others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. The crowds that went ahead of him and that followed were shouting, "Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest heaven!" When he entered Jerusalem, the whole city was in turmoil, asking, "Who is this?" The crowds were saying, "This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee."

Welcome everyone, to the 1970s favorite game show, *Let's Make a Deal!* In a moment, I'm actually going to ask for contestants, so consider whether you want to come up and join me. But for those of you who don't get a chance to watch daytime TV, or who don't look up everything on the internet, *Let's Make a Deal* is back on TV. I'm not sure it's our country's favorite game show, but it is gaining in popularity. (Especially among my nieces.)

Anyway, the basic premise is you choose between two things, usually without knowing all the details. But this is the church version of *Let's Make a Deal*, and we're pretty nice at church. So I'm going to be giving you more information. But first I need a contestant. Who's ready to play? (pick a volunteer)

Welcome to the church version of *Let's Make a Deal*. Given our limited budget and limited time, I only have two curtains. But you aren't choosing between two things; you're choosing between two people. Now the church frowns on taking people home as your prize. We don't buy, sell, trade, or award people as gifts. So you are choosing your new political leader. This is democracy meets obnoxious game show.

Okay. Behind curtain number 1, we have a man with an amazing record of involvement in politics. He had a huge impact in helping bring about economic recovery. He was instrumental in creating a national highway system. He supports healthy living both through legislation and

personal choices. He has been at the forefront of anti-tobacco legislation, and in his own life, he is a vegetarian. To top it all off, he loves his dog. This is the candidate behind curtain number 1.

Behind curtain number 2, we have another man who has a long history in politics. But he has lost almost every campaign he has run, including at least one re-election campaign. During one of his campaigns, he used soldiers at the polls to intimidate voters. While in office, he was opposed to those who were critical of him, so he arrested thousands of citizens without just cause and then held them without trial. And although the claim is sometimes controversial, it's likely that this man was treated for syphilis.

Okay contestant, which leader do you want. The one behind curtain 1? Or the leader behind curtain 2? Let's start by looking at the one you didn't choose. The man behind curtain 2 is that highly suspicious leader of American history, Abraham Lincoln. You turned him down to have the man behind curtain 1. This man is the notable, or should I say notorious, leader of German history, Adolf Hitler.

Okay, that could happen to anyone, right? Let's have a new contestant and see if we can choose a more desirable leader. Who wants to play next? (pick a volunteer) Okay. Same game, same rules. You are choosing between two leaders, so pay attention. You want to make a good choice here.

Behind curtain number 1, we have a wealthy, likeable guy. Pretty good looking, actually. His good looks may have helped him deceive the public when he hid ongoing health issues from them. He has lots of friends, but he annoys them by often borrowing money and not repaying it. Not because he doesn't have the money, but just because. And his good looks get in his way sometimes. He is a family man, but he has been known to cheat on his wife repeatedly. That

doesn't impact his ability to govern, but his poor ability to negotiate foreign relations almost caused a nuclear incident. That's the man behind curtain 1.

You could pick him, or you could go with the man behind curtain 2. This man came from poverty, but he was determined to make a life for himself. He worked his way through college and eventually through law school. When his country went to war, he was exempt from serving in the military, but he enlisted anyway. After the military, he was the youngest elected circuit judge in county history. As his political career continued, he was publicly critical of using torture as a means to gather intelligence.

Now, I don't want you to think I'm trying to confuse you again by painting people in a different light than we usually see them, so let me add a bit more information. The man behind curtain 1? He was well-known for using his faith as a basis for his politics. Even when people didn't like it, he stuck to his values. And the man behind curtain 2? Though he voluntarily served in the military during a war, he greatly exaggerated his accomplishments during the war in order to gain popularity among voters.

So who are you going to pick? The man behind curtain 1? That's none other than John F. Kennedy. And the man behind curtain 2? The man once voted "the worst politician in the Senate," Wisconsin's own Joe McCarthy. Okay. Let's try this once more. One last time. So I need a third and final contestant. (pick a volunteer)

Let's get right to it. Behind curtain 1 is a very powerful, decisive man. He has an extensive track record of unifying people across geographic and cultural divides. He comes from an elite background, and as such was raised with the right education and contacts to put him in a good place to succeed in politics. This man is incredibly wealthy, and though he spends money lavishly, he also spends vast sums of money making his country better. And you know that

mysterious ‘it factor?’ That ability to look presidential, to take charge calmly even when everything appears chaotic? This guy has that.

So you could choose him as your leader. Or you could go with the candidate behind curtain 2. If the man behind curtain 1 looks like a leader, the guy behind curtain 2 looks like he lives in his car. He always seems to have enough money to get by, but there’s no paper trail. No one can trace the source of his finances. And he spends his money in weird places – most of it behind the scenes, leaving him looking kind of shabby in public. He is known to associate with criminals and frauds, and there are accusations (though unproven) that he has incited riots. Not only does he have no previous political experience, he is only supported by a small minority of people, but they seem like they would give up everything for him.

So who’s it going to be? Behind curtain number 1, we have Caesar, the most powerful man in the entire Roman Empire. And behind curtain number 2, a lowly peasant-turned preacher, Jesus. Let’s have a hand for all our contestants this morning!

I hope this game was kind of fun. But it illustrates a point pretty clearly, right? Depending on what facts you reveal or hide, you can drastically shape how someone sees a person or situation. Jesus and Caesar were essentially opposites. Most people saw them in this light of Caesar good, Jesus bad. So it’s easy to see why so many people chose the Caesar curtain.

On Palm Sunday, we see Jesus entering Jerusalem – the capital, a highly political city. And he enters with a grand procession. It all seems to us like some kind of great parade. And if Caesar were to enter Jerusalem, it would look similar. Except instead of riding a donkey, he’d be on a magnificent war-horse. And there would be a huge crowd lining the streets, but there would also be an assortment of servants and lower politicians surrounding him. The pomp and circumstance would’ve been magnified a zillion times. This similarity was not lost on the early

followers of Jesus. They were well aware that as Jesus entered the city, he was offering them a choice.

You can continue to let Caesar be your King. You can organize your life and priorities according to what everyone else is doing. You can let the state and society dictate your behaviors. Or... Or you can choose me as your King. You can organize your life and priorities according to what God is doing. You can let the commandments and covenants of God dictate your behaviors. But you do have to make a choice.

We have curtains to choose from today. When we wave our palm branches this morning, we are making our choice. We are declaring our allegiance. Not to Caesar, not to the Roman Empire, not to America. Not to MTV, or money, or fame, or power, or beauty, or Wall Street, or anything else. We declare our loyalty first and foremost to Jesus Christ. That's why Palm Sunday is such a great celebration. It's a day we celebrate that we even have that choice. That there is an alternative to what our society presents as 'normal.' In Jesus we find a King and a Kingdom that are based on alternative values, like mercy, love, fairness, community...

It may not seem like it, but celebration is a spiritual practice. If you've been keeping up with the homework this Lent, you've tried fasting, solitude, confession and generosity. Celebration doesn't seem like it quite fits on that list. But it does. Because connecting with God is supposed to be a joyful experience. It is something to celebrate. And even if other practices are serious, it doesn't mean we don't approach them with the joy of having the opportunity to find God in that way.

So what's the homework this week? To celebrate! But more specifically, to celebrate our connection with God. Easter is the greatest celebration in the church year. But here's the thing: you can't really celebrate fully on Easter unless you have experienced the dread, the confusion,

the grief, the chaos that comes first. No country celebrates its independence unless it has first been subordinate. No one would appreciate having a day off on Labor Day if they didn't put in days of working first. It is the hard experiences that enable us to fully enter into the joy of celebration.

So your homework this week is to make time to come to one of our Holy Week services. I know your lives are busy. I know you're not used to coming to church to worship on Thursday night. I know you're not used to coming to church for anything on Friday night. But we have some incredible worship experiences planned for you. On Thursday, the youth will be leading an incredible retelling of the Last Supper that will give you a front row seat to what might have happened. They will help you to truly feel what it might have been like to be a disciple that night. On Friday, the story continues as we read the Scriptures about Jesus' trial and crucifixion.

Palm Sunday is a celebration, and Easter is an even greater one. But a whole world of events happen in between. If you can't join us for worship, at the very least, bring out your Bible and read the story, from the Last Supper through Jesus' death. And we'll meet again on Easter morning, to celebrate and connect with our God. Amen and amen.