

Dealing with Expectations

Palm Sunday / Passion Sunday

Mark 11:1-11 Mark 15:6-15

College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

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This morning I would like for all of us to reflect upon the theme of **expectations**, beginning with the Mark 11 Gospel Reading: Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem.

What has come to be called "Palm Sunday" is a celebration of the expectations that the Jewish people in the crowd that day had for this teacher and prophet named Jesus of Nazareth. When we reflect upon this biblical story from an historical perspective, it is important that we ask the question: What were the expectations of the crowd outside the gates of Jerusalem that day, when they threw down their coats and tree branches on the road in celebration of the coming of Jesus as he approached the city riding upon a donkey?

The author of the Gospel of Mark reveals that **they were expecting a messiah**. The common understanding of a messiah was that this person would **rescue the people from the political and social oppression of the Roman Empire**, which had occupied and dominated ancient Palestine for over a hundred years by this point.

They had waited and waited and waited for someone to come along and free them, much like Moses had done for the Israelites when they were enslaved in Egypt. The people who shouted "Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord" were cheering the person they believed would become their **long-expected king** – the one who would take political power and drive out the Romans. Since politics and religion were so closely intermingled, **this triumphal entry was seen, then, as both a political and a religious event.**

Upon this Jesus of Nazareth the people placed their hopes and dreams and expectations. They had great expectations! And that is where the trouble begins.

As I mentioned in my Time with the Children, **today is not only Palm Sunday** (which is what we called this particular Sunday when I was growing up), **it is also identified by the liturgical church calendar as Passion Sunday**, hence today's second Gospel Reading from Mark 15. The word **passion** is used by Christians with reference to **the suffering and death of Jesus**, and the *passion narratives* include the events of Jesus' final days in Jerusalem, beginning with his procession into the city, only to end with his condemnation and crucifixion.

All too often, churches turn this Sunday only into a big celebration of Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem, and follow that only with next Sunday's big celebration of Easter. Yet, when that occurs, it becomes all too easy to not pay attention to what happens in between these two Sundays.

For the reality is this: **in order to have a resurrection, there must first be a death. In other words, we can't properly celebrate the promises of Easter without taking seriously the events that led to Good Friday. And a lot of those events had to do not only with Jesus' threat to the status quo and the powers-to-be, but also with unmet expectations.**

Within a short five-day period of time, the crowd who joyously shouted "Hosanna!" would scream out, "Crucify him!" It became obvious to these people that this "King of the Jews" was not the kind of king they had expected. This humble and gentle man, who talked of love, forgiveness and grace, **did not meet their expectations for a powerful militaristic messiah.** Their excitement and enthusiasm quickly disappeared, then, when their expectations weren't met.

Before being too critical of the crowd, however, it may help to try to put ourselves in their midst. What do you suppose would have been our expectations if we were in the crowd that week? To broaden that, let me ask:

- What, generally, is your level of expectations of others, of yourself, of God?
- What is your typical reaction when your expectations aren't met?
- Also worth reflecting upon: what usually happens when other people's expectations of you aren't met?

We all have experienced the pain and frustration and disappointment of unmet expectations that we have placed upon others; whether they be the expectations of our political leaders, our employers and fellow employees, our teachers or students, our sports teams, our friends, our relatives - especially our parents, our children, our spouse or partner, and yes, even the expectations of our pastors.

So let me ask again, as a general rule what kind of expectations do you usually place on others and on yourself and on God? Too high or too low? Fair or unfair? Realistic or unrealistic?

It is believed that many of the expectations we have of others are actually subconscious - we're not always aware of the kind and level of expectations we have placed upon others. Subconscious expectations, especially of a loved one, sooner or later almost always lead to frustration and conflict - sometimes to the point of bitterness and resentment.

So when we become frustrated with someone, **it is crucial that we explore and identify, among other things, our unmet expectations of that person.** Only then can we evaluate whether or not it is realistic and fair to that person and ourselves. Dialogue and communication are always important, for that's the only way we can let others know what we expect of them and they of us.

Perhaps we will determine that we need to reevaluate and adjust our expectations.

The same is true not only at home or in family relationships, but also here at the church – for we are a family as well. This begs the question, then: **what are your expectations of others in this congregation? What are your expectations of your pastor?**

Three years ago I attended a week-long Interim Pastor Training Seminar at Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary. In one particular exercise we pastors were asked to list what we considered to be healthy and unhealthy expectations of a pastor. Those of us in the group came up with the following list of expectations that are actually **unhealthy for a pastor**, like:

- no days off
- be all things to all people
- be available anywhere at anytime
- meet everyone's needs
- be above being hurt
- walk on water
- be a miracle worker
- be spiritually perfect
- never say 'no'
- It never hurts, of course, to be a good electrician, plumber, and janitor.

What's interesting, however, is that **most of these unrealistic expectations come not primarily from congregation members, but rather are expectations that many pastors have of themselves.** Talk about a formula for burnout and becoming disillusioned about ministry.

Then there's the entire issue of the **expectations that pastors have of church members, and especially church leaders.**

Well, I'm sharing all of this with you this morning to make a crucial point. **There's not one of us who isn't daily bombarded with external and internal, conscious and subconscious, met and unmet expectations.** How we deal with these expectations will determine, to a large part, our ability to **cope with life:** our jobs, our church, our friends and family, and all in respect with our relationships.

And the story of Holy Week exposes the shadow side of our human nature when expectations aren't met. So one of the primary purposes of this story, I believe, is to **look at that potential in each one of us that leads us to shout "Hosanna" in one breath, then scream out "Crucify" in the next.** For we must remember that Palm Sunday is also Passion Sunday - the beginning of a week that leads to Good Friday and the cross.

Thank goodness, however, that's not the end of the story. Thank God, literally, there is an Easter morning and the promise of new beginnings. So, in relation to today's Gospel Lesson, let me leave you with some questions for you to ponder during Holy Week.

- **What are your expectations of others, especially of those you love?**
- **What are your expectations of yourself?**
- **What are your expectations of this church, especially of its leaders?**
- **What are your expectations of Jesus, this one we call the Christ?**
- **What are your expectations of God?**
- **And what do we do when our unmet expectations lead to judgmental and condemning attitudes and behaviors?**

Welcome to Holy Week.

Amen.