

From Palms to Passion: Unrealized Expectations

Matthew 21:1-11

21When they had come near Jerusalem and had reached Bethphage, at the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two disciples, ²saying 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. ³If anyone says anything to you, just say this, ‘The Lord needs them.’ And he will send them immediately.” ⁴This took place to fulfill what had been spoken through the prophet, saying, ⁵“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.” ⁶The disciples went and did as Jesus had directed them; ⁷they brought the donkey and the colt, and put their cloaks on them, and he sat on them. ⁸A very large crowd spread their cloaks on the road, and others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. ⁹The 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!” ¹⁰When he entered Jerusalem, the whole city was in turmoil, asking, “Who is this?” ¹¹The crowds were saying, “This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee.”

Intro: Everybody loves a good parade

I grew up in small towns in middle Tennessee, and we really didn't have big parades, but every Thanksgiving, part of our family ritual was to turn on the tv and get ready to watch the Macy's Thanksgiving Day parade. Whoever woke up first turned on the tv and started the day off. Throughout the morning, we'd stop to watch various artists or look at floats, finding our favorite characters. When I was younger, I remember going to Hanover, IL where my great-uncle would drive his remodeled cars in the 4th of July parade and throw out candy. When I worked in Northbrook, I quickly found out there were a few parades every year that were whole town events! The bands would march (and gather in our church yard), politicians would drive and wave...and the whole town would come out. It was a huge ordeal. Everyone was there.

There's something about a parade that raises the energy and excitement of a crowd. As the energy and excitement get revved up, so too do the expectations. Every year it should be bigger and better.

I. Humility of Jesus - Contrast to Alexander the Great and Pilate – riding in with weapons and armies; embodying the Beattitudes

Today's parade is one with which we are familiar, but I want you to pretend that you don't know the end of the story and that you are experiencing this for the first time. The people in Jerusalem were used to a big parade. 300 years prior to today's parade, Alexander the Great of Macedonia marched into Jerusalem, after laying siege to Tyre and Gaza. Jerusalem simply opened its gate, becoming a part of the Macedonian empire. Alexander would have ridden proudly into Jerusalem atop his famous war horse, the black stallion Bucephalus, flanked by armed troops. Pilate would have routinely ridden into Jerusalem with an entourage, no doubt riding in a chariot, driven by war horses with many men and weapons, reminding the people of the power and might of the Roman empire. Pilate would probably have ridden into Jerusalem just a few days prior to this since it was the time of celebrating the Passover, when the Jews celebrated their liberation from Egypt...it would have been important to remind them of their captivity.

So, this is the atmosphere into which Jesus comes. He comes riding in on a strong stallion as well, right? No. He comes riding in on a donkey...a mother donkey who comes along still nursing her colt. This is quite a contrast. Donkeys are difficult to direct because they are renowned for their stubbornness. And yet, fulfilling to prophecies of Zechariah, Jesus enters Jerusalem on a donkey. The crowds of people are impressed. This prophet from Nazareth who did so many wondrous acts was processing, and so what are they to do? Of course, they get their hopes up. Perhaps this Passover, they would celebrate another liberation. Perhaps this year would be the year when this Messiah would overthrow the Roman occupation. So, they throw down their cloaks and outer garments for his donkey to pass. And they shout, Hosanna! Hosanna means "Save us" Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Save Us! From the highest! This is an optimistic tone to start the week.

II. Expectation of the crowds contrast with Matthew 5

But this triumphal entry, as it's often labeled, was not triumphant. Jesus' entry, because it was so humble and because it would have reminded the people of the prophecies of the Old Testament. It would have clearly pronounced Rome as the new Egypt and the Emperor the new Pharaoh. The people who were waving palm branches were hoping for a new way, a new peace, hope for the common good. Jesus preached in Matthew 5 the passage that was read yesterday for Bill Schmunk's memorial service, about the new norms in the Kingdom of God, where the poor, the mourning, the meek, the hungry, the merciful, the pure, the peacemakers – are called blessed. Oh, and those who are persecuted for righteousness sake. And, in today's march, we witness Jesus embodying these principles fully. But this upside down entry is followed by more of the same. Jesus goes into the Temple and throws over the tables in the Temple, interrupting business as usual. Jesus begins some controversial demonstrations – demonstrations that stand up to injustice and oppression, demonstrations that show the contrast between the Kingdom of God and the Kingdom that the people had become comfortable operating out of.

III. Expectation of triumph turns into a resurrection

This is a dangerous road – the one of speaking out against injustice. It's a road that has been well-trod by religious leaders, in Old Testament times, when it landed Daniel in the Lions' den to Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego being burned alive to more recent times with Rosa Parks to Martin Luther King, Jr. to St. Francis of Assisi and Dorothy Day and Gandhi. Some of these lived through their passion – their passion for justice and righteous anger and demonstrations. And others, who like Jesus, paid the ultimate price. This week doesn't end so well for Jesus, as he hung dripping and naked and bloody on a Roman cross. The crowds which were hoping for a Messiah were not ready for this kind of triumph, one that still paid taxes and still acted peacefully. Love and justice don't always seem that threatening, but when they offer such a stark contrast to the expectations and the status quo, it can make even the most rational of people want to lash out in anger and retaliation.

John Mabry writes in *Crisis and Communion*, that "Rosa Parks is an imitator of Christ, not because she suffered for taking her stand (or keeping her seat, in her case), but because she had the courage to believe in her own dignity and fought for it in spite of the conflict that resulted. Nelson Mandela is an imitator of Christ, not because he suffered in prison, but because he held out for peace and justice, and led a nation to resurrection. In each case it is not the suffering that is redemptive, but the courage to pursue justice in the face of pain and evil."

Jesus' disciples all either abandoned him or betrayed him by the end of the week. The question is how much we're willing to stand for. How does Palm Sunday, the passion, and this Holy Week change things? How are we willing to live differently? Are we ready to change our expectations and live with passion? I pray that we will, in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.