

# LENT: A Time to Fill Your Cup

## Part 6: Expectations vs. Reality

### Palm/Passion Sunday

John 12:12-19  
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

Rev. Todd B. Freeman  
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Growing up Presbyterian, like with most other Christian denominations, this particular Sunday was always known as Palm Sunday. As a kid with a palm branch in hand, I always remember it as a fun Sunday. When we came back to church the next week it was Easter Sunday, which had even more celebration and excitement. The church we attended either didn't have services of worship on Maundy Thursday or Good Friday of Holy Week, or we just skipped them. The result was that we simply went from one celebration to the next – Palm Sunday then Easter. I don't remember, therefore, ever focusing much on the last week of Jesus' life, especially his trial and death by crucifixion.

Evidently, that experience was a common one. Realizing this, at some point in the not-too-distant past the wise folks who do the Presbyterian Planning Calendar re-designated this Sunday as both Palm *and* Passion Sunday. Jesus' Passion, meaning the events and agony of this last week of his life, helps us to remember that **between these two joyous Sundays there is a cross and a brutal execution**. In fact, nearly 20-25% of each gospel involves the events between just these two Sundays. So in addition to Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem on this Palm Sunday, we are called to look ahead, and especially for those who won't be attending additional Holy Week services, to **why all this joy and anticipation turned to such sorrow and pain in less than a week**.

The best way I've found to tie all these events together is to look closely at **the issue of expectations, especially the psychological human reaction to unmet expectations that begins with disappointment and can end in rage**.

The week starts with great expectations. According to the Gospel of John, the large crowd that gathered at that gate in Jerusalem to welcome Jesus was the same crowd that witnessed Jesus' raising of his friend Lazarus from the dead. We looked at that story last Sunday. All four gospels indicate that whoever it was that made up the crowd that day **anticipated that Jesus would fulfill their expectations for a king, a prophet, or a messiah**. They projected all their hopes onto Jesus, that he would save and deliver them from the oppression of their occupation by the Roman Empire. So yes, there were political expectations of Jesus as well as religious ones. **But since this Jesus didn't fulfill their expectations the initial cries of 'Hosanna' quickly turned to 'Crucify him' within the span of a few days**. Would you say that was a healthy and fair way to deal with unmet expectations?

Actually, Jesus never had any intention of fulfilling their misplaced expectations. This is what I love, however, about the scriptures. Yes, biblical stories reflect and reveal what was going on in their ancient context – whether that be literal or metaphorical. But *after* we interpret what we believe to be the authors' intent, **we are meant to transfer what we learn into our own context.** How can we see our own story in those stories, and their story in ours? This particular story, then, should lead us to **pause and reflect upon the possibility that some of our own expectations of Jesus, therefore of God, may also be somewhat misplaced. This is why we must constantly reassess what it is we believe about the nature and character of God.**

For example, my current understanding of Who God Is, and therefore my expectations of God, is much different than when I was in the conservative evangelical phase of my journey of faith. A large portion of Christianity today, in my opinion, still has misinformed and misplaced expectations of the kind of 'king' that Jesus revealed to be at the heart of the nature and character of God. Rather than experiencing the Sacred Presence of God as humble, gentle and peace-loving, many see God and Jesus more as a victorious warrior who comes to kick butt and take names. (Yeah, I said it.) The image of a warrior, however, comes with the notion of winners and losers – big time losers. This particular understanding of God has had and can have dangerous consequences. While the Crusades come to mind, so does the current nationalistic attitude that God is only on *our* side, that our enemies are God's enemies. Therefore, God will lead us to victory (whatever that means) if we only believe strongly enough. The same is applies to the issue of personal salvation. I not only question this theological mentality, but deny the reality of that kind of interventionist warrior God. In other words, that particular expectation of God is not reflected in reality.

Let's look, then, at how you, I, and we together as a community of faith, **deal with unmet expectations.** An expectation means to wait for, or count on, or look forward to something. It can go as far as to insist on or demand something. This can be a good thing. These are the expectations that we think are reasonable or necessary, or that someone is obligated to fulfill by duty – like by a contractual or covenantal agreement. **Yet, have we not all experienced the disappointment of unmet expectations that we have placed upon others,** whether they be our political leaders, our sports teams, our employers and fellow employees, our teachers or students, our friends, our relatives - especially those expectations we have of our parents, our children, our spouse or partner? And yes, even unmet expectations of our churches and pastors?

In general, what level of expectations have you found that you typically place on others? Too low or too high? Fair or unfair? Realistic or unrealistic? As importantly, what kind and level of expectations do you place on yourself? **It is believed that many of the expectations we have are actually unconscious - we're not always aware of the kind and level of expectations we have placed upon others, and ourselves.** And unconscious expectations, especially of a loved one, almost always lead to frustration and disappointment. Perhaps, it can then reach the point of anger, resentment, and bitterness. I don't know about you, but when I did something wrong as a kid I'd rather my parents be mad at me than disappointed in me.

**So when we become disappointed with someone, it is crucial that we explore and identify our unmet expectations of that person.** Only then can we evaluate whether or not it is realistic and fair to that person and to ourselves. If it is determined

that it is a fair expectation then we can talk about the issue with that person and attempt to find a resolution that satisfies both. **If we evaluate an expectation as unrealistic, unfair, overly demanding or even selfish, then we need to let it go or to adjust our expectation.**

Successful marriage counseling, for example, always involves an honest, open and on-going discussion of one's expectations of the other. **For one of the biggest contributors to failed relationships are unmet and often unspoken expectations. Dialogue and communication, and perhaps negotiation, are always the key. That is the only way we can let others know what we expect of them and they of us.**

The same is as true in a business setting or a church setting as it is in a family setting. There's not a person in this sanctuary today, for instance, who doesn't have some level of expectations of this church – either of this service of worship today itself, or more generally of our programming, or of the Ruling Elders on the Session and the work of our ministry teams, or of the church staff, including the pastor. I can knowledgeably speak to the last one.

**Pastors, almost by nature, often carry around a fear of disappointing others,** and are especially hard on themselves when they do. Perhaps worse is learning, usually after the fact, that someone is disappointed in you but you either don't have any idea why, or that it's simply a case of an unmet expectation that has gone unspoken. We pastors, not unlike a couple in a marriage, continue to prove that we're terrible at reading minds. So again, conversation, dialogue and perhaps negotiation are the key to understanding.

So, for instance, in order for me to be as effective as possible as your pastor, it's crucial that I know and understand your expectations, both on a congregational and individual level. And yes, it's important to know my expectations. It tends to be the case, however, that pastors are harder on themselves when it comes to unmet expectations. A counseling book I have provides a list of what they found to be **common expectations that pastors have of themselves. Perhaps these are expectations that you have of yourself.**

1. to be tireless;
2. to be above being hurt;
3. to be excellent at every task;
4. to be emotionally self-sufficient;
5. to be free from material needs;
6. to be spiritually perfect.

So, while you in this congregation may not place me under such unrealistic and unhealthy expectations, perhaps there are times when I need being saved from my own. Again, the same may apply to you in your life.

I'm sharing all of this with you this morning to make a point. **There's not a one of us who isn't daily bombarded with external and internal, conscious and unconscious, healthy and unhealthy, met and unmet expectations. How we deal with these expectations will determine, to a large part, our ability to cope with life and cope with our relationships.** For if we truly examine our expectations and deal with them in a realistic manner we might **spare ourselves living life in constant disappointment, thus helping in the process to fill our cup.**

So in relation to today's Gospel reading, let me leave you with some questions to ponder during Holy Week.

**What are your expectations (met and unmet):**

- **of others, especially your loved ones?**
- **of yourself?**
- **of this Jesus, the one we call the Christ?**
- **of God?**
- **of the role of the church and congregation?**

Finally, how would you compare those expectations to reality?

Amen.

Resource:

Louis McBurney, M.D., *Counseling Christian Workers*, 1986. Vol. 2, pg. 43 of the *Resources For Christian Counseling* series, Word Publishing