

Lent: The Clash Between Expectations and Reality

Palm/Passion Sunday

Matthew 21:1-11 Zechariah 9:9-10
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

Rev. Todd B. Freeman
April 5, 2020

Many of you may remember that I was part of a trip sponsored by Tulsa Metropolitan Ministry to Israel and Palestine back in 2018. Well, earlier this week, one of our guides on that trip, named Adam, posted to his Facebook page several photos of Jerusalem from right now. There wasn't a person in sight at the famous landmarks in the old walled city, which under normal circumstances would have been packed with tourists, and those on a religious/spiritual pilgrimage now at the beginning of Holy Week.

Reflecting upon this reality, Jill Duffield, editor of *The Presbyterian Outlook*, asked an interesting question this week, "What if Jesus' triumphant entry into Jerusalem happened now, when many of us must shelter in place and groups of ten or more are banned?" There would have been basically no one lining the roads shouting "Hosanna!" and waving palms or throwing their coats on the road. Jesus and his twelve disciples make for a group of thirteen, three too many to be seen walking together. That's also three too many to gather in that upper room later in the week for their last supper together. I wonder who's going to be left out, and how the rest would share a meal sitting six feet away from each other? Holy Week as we know it wouldn't be the same if Jesus' had to cancel his triumphal entry into Jerusalem.

Think of all the life events that you, and everyone else, has had to cancel or postpone, for safety reasons, during this worldwide COVID-19 pandemic. Yesterday, for example, Pat Lucy's grandson, Graham, and his fiancé, Paige, were supposed to be married in this sanctuary. It's been postponed until September. I can't imagine how hard it must be for Hayley, our congregation's high school senior, whose graduation, let alone prom, had to be cancelled. How painful it must be for those from four families in our congregation who have had to indefinitely postpone a memorial service for their loved one who passed away within the past few weeks.

Our structured patterns in life, our normal rhythms, milestone, and plans of any kind, are in limbo. It's hard to measure just how disorienting and stressful that has been for each of us. On this Sunday, we have not paraded around this sanctuary waving our palms, nor will we be able to gather for Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, or even Easter Sunday. And yet, Holy Week isn't being cancelled! Duffield encourages us with this, "Even if crowds do not line the highway and shout, even if only two or three can gather at home, even if we worship from our sofa instead of in our normal pews, Jesus makes it to Jerusalem." Yes, Christ enters our living rooms no less than Jesus walked the streets of Jerusalem and we can still cry out to him, "Hosanna!"

The story of Holy Week itself, the last week of Jesus' life, involves people whose emotions are conflicted and thoughts are confused. That includes his own disciples, once faithful followers now filled with fear, betrayal, and denial. This biblical story reveals a mixed bag of human emotions, opinions, understandings, and perspectives. Given that, perhaps a more realistic way to look at Holy Week is that **in the midst of everything, perhaps everyone simply did the best they could do in that moment.** During our current disorienting times, we could benefit from having the same perspective. With our mixed bag of emotions, opinions, and uncertainties of how to even approach life on a daily basis, we need the grace to accept that we are simply doing our best under these difficult circumstances. Duffield adds, "As we grieve what is lost this year - the waving palms, the soaring swell of the organ, the joy of singing with one another in the sanctuary, the touch of handshakes and hugs - we can be sure Jesus meets us where we are, no matter how we are. Jesus will not stop on the outskirts of Jerusalem or on the fringes of our lives. He enters fully into the city knowing what's to come. He enters fully into our lives, knowing our doubts, failings, denials, betrayals, misunderstandings and disappointments. Jesus, then and now, comes into places and spaces of upheaval, injustice, sickness, need, and evil. He came into this shaken-up earthly realm to save it, to bring healing and wholeness, forgiveness and mercy, grace upon grace."

Therefore, I want to say just a few words about one of the major themes that runs throughout Holy Week, and it has to do with the issue of expectations. And **I can't think of a better time than right now to address the expectations, or confusion thereof, of what we are all facing in our own personal lives, our family life, and professional lives during this disorienting time of upheaval.**

Holy Week, Palm Sunday, starts with great expectations of this Jesus of Nazareth who comes into Jerusalem humbly riding on a donkey. The crowd that gathered 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 shouts of 'Crucify him' within the span of a few days. Now that's not a very healthy model or way to deal with unmet expectations!

This should cause 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 you, and I, must constantly reassess what it is you believe and understand about the nature and character of God. But that extends to ourselves, as well. How do you respond to your unmet expectations of others? How do you respond to your unmet expectations of yourself? This has certainly been brought to the forefront of my own thoughts in the past few weeks. Hopefully, it has not been a quick jump from Hosanna to Crucify! – of others, or toward ourselves.

After a Zoom video conference call this past week with the other Presbyterian pastors in Eastern Oklahoma Presbytery, a common theme was the disorienting nature of what do our congregations, and we ourselves, expect of ourselves during this time when we can't meet in person, have had to do crash courses in what we hope is relevant virtual worship and ministry, and find ways to connect like never before. As you might expect, **there seems to be an extra level of whatever we're doing isn't enough. I suspect many, if not all of you are having a similar personal experience during this time of isolation, of working from home, of having the children to care for, or to teach.** It

makes us all aware of just how much we base our expectations on the assumption of a structured and routine life. But most of that has been thrown out the window for the moment.

Our expectations, especially our unmet ones, are running head first into our current reality. Perhaps, then, we need to give ourselves, and others – especially those in the same shelter-in-place location, a bit more grace, a bit more understanding, perhaps even a bit more forgiveness.

So, what's all this have to do with Palm Sunday? I'm not really sure. I had expected myself to know, but **maybe it's just time to take a step back and know we are all simply trying the best we can to navigate these uncharted waters of a quarantined life.** Regardless, Jesus is with us, and we are with him through this Holy Week, a week of suffering and sacrifice, a week that passes through the events of Good Friday before we can celebrate the promise of hope, transformation, and new life on Easter Sunday – but this year, virtually.

Amen.

Resource:

Jill Duffield, "Palm/Passion Sunday", *The Presbyterian Outlook*, 3-30-20.